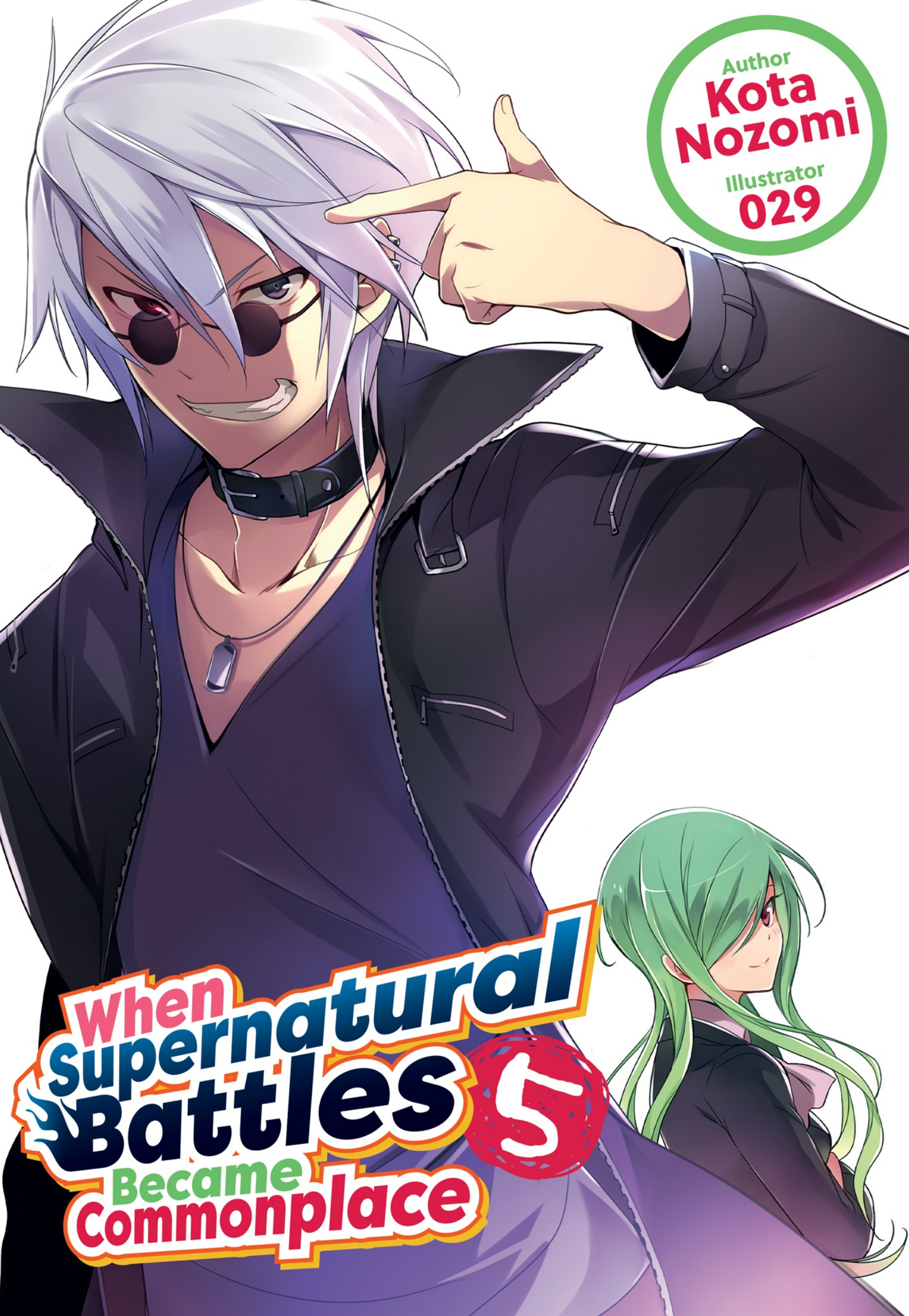
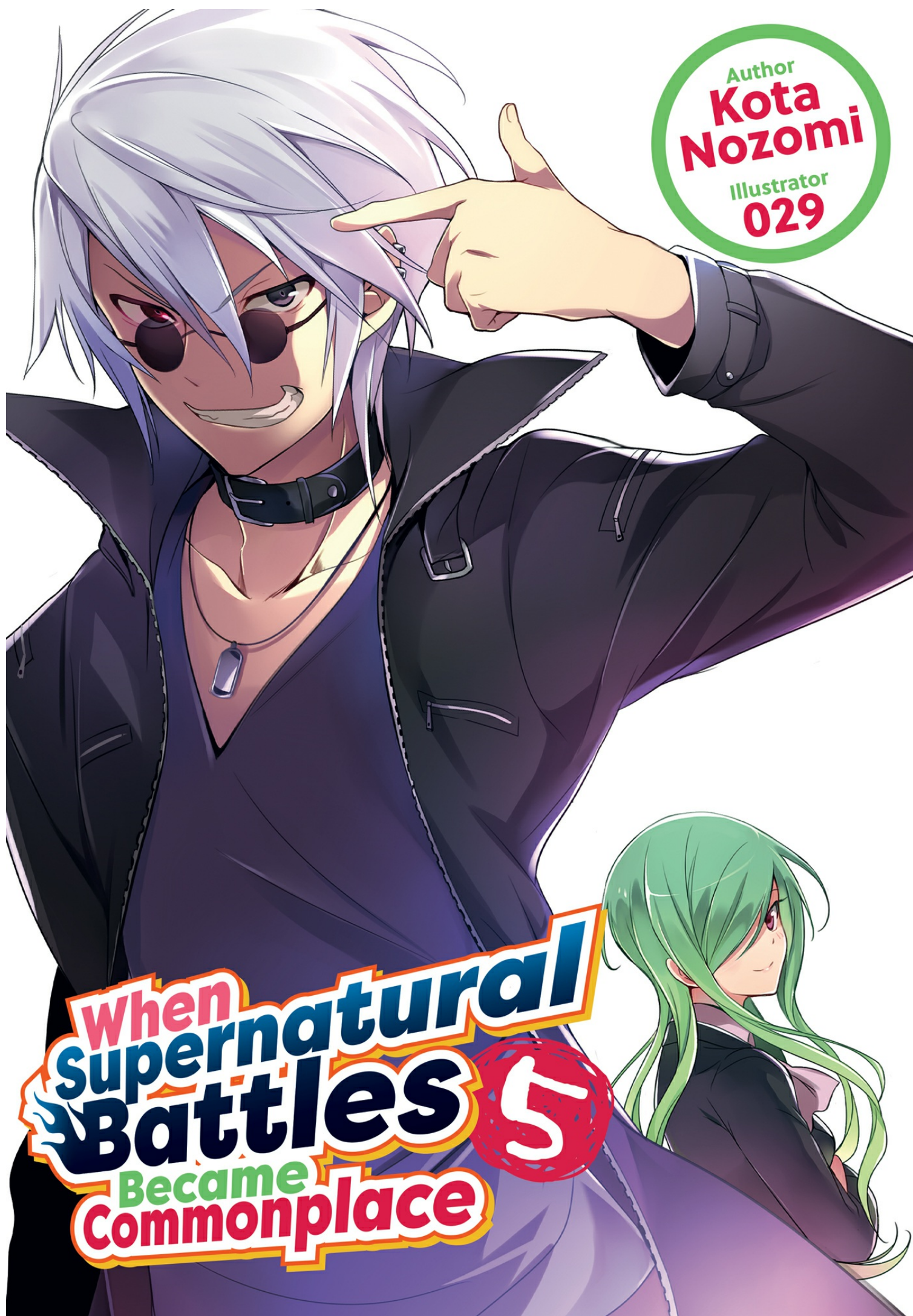


Author
**Kota
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029



**When
supernatural
Battles** **5**
**Became
Commonplace**

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Supernatural

Battles

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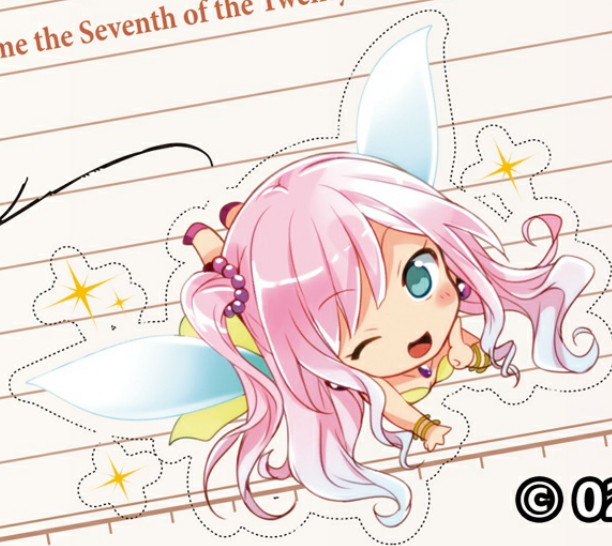
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Leatia





Irrelevant

**Kanzaki
Tomoyo**

**CLOSED
CLOCK**

The wielder of *Closed Clock*, a supernatural power that lets her manipulate time. A closet nerd with the rare ability to keep up with Andou's delusional ramblings.

ILLUSTRATOR:

029



**Kushikawa
Hatoko**

A childhood friend of Andou's, whose power, *Over Element*, gives her absolute control over the forces of nature. She never understands a single word that comes out of Andou's mouth.

**OVER
ELEMENT**

**Takanashi
Sayumi**

The mild-mannered and erudite president of the literary club. She's all but mastered her power, *Route of Origin*, which allows her to return anything and everything to the way it's meant to be. She mostly just uses it to mess with Andou, though.



**ROUTE OF
ORIGIN**

**DARK
AND DARK**



A boy with a pathological case of chuunibyou and a love of supernatural battles that dates back to long before he obtained his own power. His power, *Dark and Dark*, lets him create lukewarm black fire...and nothing else.

**Andou
Jurai**

**WORLD
CREATE**

A fourth-grade elementary schooler who spends all of her time hanging out in a high school literary club, for some reason. Her power, *World Create*, gives her the ability to create matter and space freely, and she's less than reserved about using it.



**Himeki
Chifuyu**

Prologue: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the First of the Twenty-First Year

This world is beautiful.

Thus, I am driven to destroy it.

**Ours is a realm devoid of distortion,
and a day will come when I wipe it clean.**

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Yukawa Touhei stood in the decrepit remains of a long-shuttered bowling alley. It was an old building, and when its owner had failed to find anyone to sell it off to following the business's closure, they didn't even bother getting it demolished; they simply left it there to slowly deteriorate. It seemed like the sort of place that the local youth would sneak into for kicks when summer rolled around, but summer it was not, and nobody had any reason to go anywhere near it—all the more so given the witching hour had only just passed.

The building was silent as the grave. Moonlight beamed through the shattered windows, illuminating fragments of glass and empty cans that lay scattered across the floor, as well as cracked pins and ancient balls strewn about the lanes.

"Hmph... What a dump. Damn lights don't even work," Yukawa sullenly muttered, kicking a nearby can across the room. He reached into the pocket of the Hawaiian shirt he was wearing, pulled out a handful of rough, irregularly shaped rings, then began sliding them onto his fingers, one by one. They weren't the sort of rings one wore for fashion's sake—no, they were the closest approximation to knuckle dusters he could get his hands on, and he knew he'd need them for the battle to come.

"Yeah, we're supposed to fight somewhere people won't see us. Rules of the War, yadda yadda—but did we really have to haul all the way out to *this*

craphole? Not like it even matters if we get caught, right? The spirits'll work something out either way," Yukawa grumbled belligerently as he glared down lane one toward the back of the building.

There, deep in the darkness, glowed a single speck of orange light. It was the smoldering tip of a cigarette, held in the mouth of the man standing there, tall and alone amid the pins and shards of glass. The cigarette wavered, and a cloud of smoke spilled forth from the man's mouth as his lips twisted into a mocking grin. "Didn't want to bother the locals, that's all," he said.

"The locals?" repeated Touhei, raising his eyebrow.

"You look like the sort of man who'll scream like a banshee when he dies. Now, it'd be one thing if you were a cute little lady—*that'd* be a scream people could tolerate—but nobody wants to hear a guy wail it up, right?"

Yukawa snarled at the provocation, glaring daggers into the darkness as the man grinned back at him. The man was clad in a long, jet-black coat that blended in with his surroundings, while his strikingly brilliant silver hair stood out like a spotlight. He had a pair of round-lensed sunglasses on, slid ever so slightly down the bridge of his nose to reveal the *pièce de résistance* of his whole ensemble: his bloodred right eye, bright and vivid enough to stand out unsettlingly in the shadows.

"*Ancient Lucifer*, Kiryuu Hajime," scoffed Yukawa. "I've heard the rumors about you. Heh—that's one crazy-ass name you've got people calling you these days, huh?"

Kiryuu shrugged. "Not like I came up with it. I just kept fighting and fighting, and before I knew it, people'd started calling me that on their own," he droned disinterestedly, then took a drag on his cigarette. A cloud of smoke trailed from his mouth, dancing through the air and disappearing into the shadows above. A moment passed. "You got that? I didn't come up with it myself. People started calling me it on their own," he repeated emphatically for...some reason.

Coulda figured that out on my own, Yukawa thought. *What sorta dumbass would come up with a title like that for himself?* "That so? Then you've got it pretty rough, pal. I'd hate to get saddled with a lame-ass name like *that*," he flippantly replied, matching Kiryuu's insult with one of his own.

In truth, Yukawa didn't think that Kiryuu's title was lame. He didn't think anything of it at all, in fact—he couldn't have cared less. Kiryuu, however, inhaled sharply at Yukawa's words, his eyes widening. Kiryuu clenched his teeth, and the front end of his newly bisected cigarette dropped to the ground. Then he spoke once more, sounding ever so slightly like he was forcing himself to stay calm.

“Okay, no, stop. You really shouldn't say stuff like that. You know that whoever thought the title up probably put a lot of effort into it, right? You shouldn't crap on someone's hard work when they did their best. Yeah, that's a garbage thing to do. And anyway, *I* actually like it. *Ancient Lucifer*—it's got a really nice ring to it. Whoever thought it up has the soul of a poet. Wasn't me, though,” he quickly clarified for a third time, his cheek twitching conspicuously.

For a moment, Yukawa found himself baffled by Kiryuu's inexplicable behavior, but he shut that line of thought down as quickly as it had come and instead focused upon the enemy in front of him. *Ancient Lucifer*—or rather, Kiryuu Hajime—truly was the subject of all sorts of rumors. That said, rumors beget rumors, and there was no telling how much of what was said about Kiryuu was fact and how much was overblown fantasy.

Some said that he was an excessively belligerent man, while others claimed he very rarely fought at all. Some said his temper dangled on a frayed shoestring, and others swore that he was perpetually composed and showed no hint of emotion. There was just no telling which, if any, of the stories were true—that is, with two notable exceptions. First: the fact that Kiryuu had the supernatural power to manipulate gravity. Second: the fact that the community at large had identified him as exceptionally dangerous. Even the *organization* that Yukawa himself had recently joined was keeping an eye on Kiryuu Hajime, and they were by no means doing so out of goodwill.

The hell am I freaking out about? thought Yukawa as he wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, his mouth curving into a twisted smile. *So what, he can manipulate gravity. That'd probably be a real bitch for most folks to deal with, sure. It's the ultimate power. Too bad for him, though—he picked the wrong opponent this time around!*

Yukawa Touhei's power was more or less a hard counter to Kiryuu Hajime's

gravity manipulation. It was almost stunning how well-suited his ability set was for handling this particular foe—almost enough as to make him wonder if he had been given his power for the specific purpose of taking Kiryuu out. *Can't get cocky, though. My power's got an edge over his, but if I don't nail the timing, it's curtains for me. Underestimating a power like his is a good way to get yourself killed.* Yukawa wiped the grin from his face and stood at the ready, focusing intently upon his opponent.

“Bwa ha ha!” Kiryuu laughed. It was a strange way to laugh—dry and distinctive. The uncomfortable tenseness of his expression from a moment before had vanished, replaced by a smile of self-assured confidence. “I don’t know what you’re thinking so hard about right now,” said Kiryuu, “but I can hazard a guess. You’re thinking about how brutally dangerous my power is, right?”

Yukawa twitched with surprise. It was like Kiryuu had peered directly into his innermost thoughts.

Kiryuu grinned mockingly. “Well, you can stop worrying. I’m not planning on using my power today at all.”

“Y-You *what?*” gasped Yukawa. He really did doubt his own ears for a moment. Surely Kiryuu hadn’t *actually* just said he wouldn’t use his power?

“What, couldn’t hear me? I’m saying I don’t *have* to use my power on you. You’re not worth it,” said Kiryuu.

What the hell is wrong with this freak...? He seriously thinks he can take me on without his power? Yukawa was too bewildered to reply.

“Hmm? What, not enough of a handicap for you?” asked Kiryuu after a moment of silence passed by. He crouched down, picked up an old, broken pin, and used its jagged tip to scratch a circle on the floor of the lane. It was centered on him, with a radius of around a meter or so. “I won’t set foot outside this circle,” he continued. “And if you manage to move me out of it somehow, we’ll call that your win. I’ll drop out of the War, then and there.”

“You making fun of me, you son of a bitch?!” Yukawa barked indignantly.

Kiryuu’s smile, however, didn’t budge. “Making fun of you? Not even close! If

I were making fun of you, I'd say, hmm...I'd say that I'll only use my left pinkie finger to kick your ass, on top of everything else. *That's* how you make fun of someone."

"The hell're you—?"

"Come at me. I'll make it *very* clear that we're on totally different levels," said Kiryuu in an almost impossibly inflammatory tone. He'd been talking down to Yukawa since the very beginning, and Yukawa was finally nearing the limit of his patience.

"Get the hell off your high horse, you punk-ass bitch!" Yukawa roared, breaking into a sprint and charging directly at Kiryuu.

One could hardly overstate the importance of supernatural powers in the Spirit War, but that being said, they weren't the one and only factor that determined who came out on top of any given battle. A combatant's physical strength played a vital role as well, and Yukawa happened to have great confidence in his abilities in hand-to-hand combat. At the very least, he knew that he wouldn't lose in a brawl against someone like Kiryuu, who looked like he barely had a muscle to speak of. *If that skinny little sissy isn't gonna use his power, then I've got this in the bag!*

"Say goodbye to your pretty face, asshole!" he shouted as he closed the gap between him and Kiryuu at a remarkable pace. Yukawa was quite the runner, and it barely took him a second to barrel down the bowling lane. But then, just a step before he entered Kiryuu's circle, he let out a grunt of surprise, his eyes widening with disbelief. He literally couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Kiryuu Hajime...had stepped out of the circle. Yukawa hadn't done anything to him at all. He'd just walked right on out, abandoning the territory he himself had designated as his.

Wh-What the hell is he doing? Huh? Is he...giving up? Did he just admit defeat before we even started? thought Yukawa, who was as befuddled as he'd ever been. Unfortunately for him, the fight continued carrying on in the meantime.

Yukawa had been running at a full sprint, and it goes without saying that he couldn't come to a stop in the blink of an eye. He'd been one step away from his opponent, who in turn had taken a single step forward. This, of course,

meant that the distance between the two of them was now a flat zero, and before Yukawa could even process what was happening, he was greeted by the sight of Kiryuu's raised fist—then by the sight of said fist swinging through the air, directly toward him.

His right hand? But he said he wouldn't use that one! M-Maybe he meant my right? But wait, he said he'd only use one fing—

If this had been an ordinary fistfight, or if Kiryuu really *had* stayed within his circle, Yukawa could have almost certainly dodged his punch. That one step had changed everything. Yukawa was fighting one step too far ahead, in a physical *and* temporal sense, and caught off guard as he was, he could do nothing to stop himself from colliding face-first with Kiryuu's fist.

A dull thud echoed throughout the bowling hall. Landing a solid counter involves using your enemy's movements against them, and Kiryuu had done so to exceptional effect—the power behind Kiryuu's punch was supplemented by the momentum from Yukawa's charge, and together, they'd resulted in a devastating blow.

"Gah, *uuuggghhh!*" Yukawa wailed, crashing to the floor and curling into a ball. "You, agh, son of a... You left the circle... Your right *hand*," he groaned, clutching at his fractured cheek bone and busted molars.

"Bwa ha ha! Bwaaa ha ha ha ha ha!" Kiryuu cackled, sneering derisively at his fallen foe. It was a sneer of utmost enjoyment. "Supernatural battle playbook, rule twenty-one: never believe *anything* your enemy tells you!"

Yukawa let out a grunt-like growl. His blood boiled, and his mind was racked with conflicting emotions—fury toward the foe who had deceived him, and regret that he'd been stupid enough to fall for it.

"Go to hell...! Screw you, you little *shit!*" Yukawa bellowed. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you *dead!*"

"Bwa ha ha! You'll *kill* me?" Kiryuu mockingly repeated. "That's a pretty dangerous word to be throwing around so carelessly! Prosciutto and Aizen would be laughing their asses off if they were here, y'know?"

"Quit spouting bullshit! It's *my* turn now, and as soon as I use my power,

you're *history*! I'll *never* lose to you, because *my* power's—"

"You don't *get* a turn," said Kiryuu, cutting Yukawa off midsentence. "My turn never ends."

"What're you *talking*—?!" Yukawa yelled, moving to stand, then stiffened up and fell silent. An incredibly potent chill rushed through him, like he'd just had a bucket of ice water dumped over his head. He'd noticed something—something right next to him that shouldn't have been there, and that had him petrified.

It was a black orb, floating in the air. It was only around the size of a ping-pong ball, but in spite of its size and color, it didn't blend in with the dimly lit background. No, it stood out, its blackness a shade darker than anything else around it. The word "hole" sprung immediately into Yukawa's mind. It was a hole that not even light itself could escape from, and thus, a hole blacker than anything else in this world. A hole in space itself—the *ultimate* hole.

"Supernatural battle playbook, rule fifteen: the battle system isn't turn-based," said Kiryuu. "And rule eight: never assume your opponent will hold back their strongest abilities."

Kiryuu's downright cheerful words didn't register for Yukawa. He had already succumbed to despair, and there wasn't room left in his mind for anything else. *No, wait*, he thought. *I haven't even done anything yet!*

Yukawa crawled on his hands and knees, desperate to escape from the black hole, but it dragged him in mercilessly. And not just him: it dragged in the shards of glass, the empty cans, the remains of Kiryuu's cigarette—anything with form fell into its shapeless clutches, and even the formless, from the air to the light, was sucked in as well, coming together in one singular point.

"Be consumed," said Kiryuu. "*Pinpoint Abyss*."

And then, in the blink of an eye, it was over. The very instant Kiryuu named his technique, the black hole devoured all, sucking in Yukawa's flesh, bones, hair, nails—his very being itself plunged into the bottomless depths of oblivion, to be crushed into an infinitely small pinprick of space. "Kiryuu...*Hajime*—" were his last words. In his final moment, Yukawa didn't even have the time to

scream. He was simply swallowed up by the void...and perished. And so, the battle came to an end.

“Wrong. Not Kiryuu Hajime,” Kiryuu Hajime defiantly declared as he turned his back on the gaping hemisphere that his attack had carved out from the floor. “It’s Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. *That* is the name of the man who crushed you...not that you can hear me anymore, I guess.”

“But seriously, though,” Kiryuu mumbled a few minutes later. He was standing in a parking lot just across the street from the abandoned bowling alley he’d had his battle in, watching the building...or more specifically, watching Yukawa Touhei, who had just walked outside, cocked his head in confusion—several times—and then wandered off on his way. “Whether the loser gets horribly maimed or straight-up dies, they get fixed right up, forget everything about the War, and go back to their ordinary lives? The Spirit War’s got some pretty dull rules backing it up.”

Kiryuu was leaning against an old, obviously abandoned car that somebody had apparently dumped in the parking lot, talking to a girl who was floating in the air beside him. “Well, yeah,” said the girl. “The War’s set up to make sure that it doesn’t cause problems for humanity on the whole. That’s, like, its whole baseline principle.”

“Bwa ha ha!” cackled Kiryuu. “That’s rich, considering you’re having us humans dance like puppets for your amusement!”

Kiryuu certainly sounded like he was enjoying himself, but the girl scowled. It’s worth noting, incidentally, that the girl herself was only a girl in a somewhat loose sense of the term. She was, after all, not human. You could tell at a glance—her eyes and hair were colorful in ways that a human’s would never be, and she had a pair of semitranslucent wings sprouting from her back. Her name was Leatia, and she was of a race of beings known as spirits that hailed from an entirely different world.



“You really wrapped that one up quick, though,” Leatia idly commented. “Especially considering you toyed around with the *last* one for so long that they got to put out a hundred percent—actually, make that a hundred *twenty* percent—of their full power before you took ‘em down.”

Kiryuu frowned and clicked his tongue with irritation. “The dickhead said my title was lame. He had it coming. Anyone who makes fun of my aesthetic gets crushed with my full power, right from the start.”

“Yeesh. Of all the topics to get set off by,” Leatia sighed. “So, what, he said your name sucked, and you just blew him away without even bothering to make a show of it? Poor guy.”

“You know what, though? There’s one positive thing I can take away from this: the title *Ancient Lucifer* has finally started making the rounds,” said Kiryuu, his scowl melting away into an ebullient grin. “It was worth putting all that effort into spreading it around! Sometimes proselytization really does pay off.”

“You did put a stupid amount of effort into it—emphasis on the stupid. Telling people, ‘Some call me *Ancient Lucifer*,’ spreading rumors around, having your teammates casually drop the name into conversation...”

“That’s what they call stealth marketing. I hope you’re taking notes.”

“I *note* that you’re changing the subject, jackass,” sighed Leatia with an irritated click of her tongue. Then she put on a more serious expression and looked Hajime in the eye. “What I’m getting at is that you killed the guy so fast, you couldn’t get any useful information out of him.”

“Hmm. So, in that case...” said Kiryuu, an unmistakable hint of interest creeping into his tone. His eyes shone with the light of curiosity—like the eyes of a child who’d just been given a brand new plaything. “I guess he really *was* a Rogue Player, huh?”

“Right,” said Leatia. “I got word from my coworkers on the Committee that there’s no record of a Player named Yukawa Touhei ever being part of this War. No Spirit Handler for him either.”

“We’ve been dealing with a lot of these Rogues lately,” noted Kiryuu.

“And we might know why now. We did some more digging, and it’s starting to look like they have some sort of group they’re all part of. More of an organization, really. I’m pretty sure that guy you just wasted was in it. I mean, he was probably just a grunt, but still.”

“An organization?” Kiryuu repeated, raising an eyebrow.

“The War Management Committee’s taken to calling them *F*, for convenience’s sake. The investigation’s still ongoing, so I can’t give you any specifics yet.”

“*F*... Hmm.”

Just then, a car pulled into the parking lot. It was a small, white microcar with a sign on its back that indicated it was being operated by a new driver. It pulled up next to Kiryuu and Leatia, and the driver’s side window rolled down a moment later.

“Hajime, Leatia!” said the driver as she leaned out the window. She was a young woman wearing the sort of suit that soon-to-be college graduates favored for job interviews. Her makeup was tasteful and understated, and she gave off a clean and tidy impression overall. Her bangs were parted and fell down across her face, covering up one of her eyes.

“Hitomi,” said Kiryuu. “You came to pick me up? I thought you had to be up early tomorrow.”

“I do, but it’s fine,” said Hitomi. “I was looking for an excuse to go for a drive, honestly. I did just buy this car and all.”

“Bought it used, yeah. And cheap.”

“Keep talking like *that* and I might change my mind about having space for you!” Hitomi pouted.

“My bad, my bad,” laughed Kiryuu as he climbed into the passenger’s seat. Leatia gave Hitomi a look and a nod, then vanished on the spot to who knows where.

“Guess I’ll just go and pick up Plaintive Dame Dolor tomorrow,” muttered Kiryuu. “Her light’s broken, so I can’t ride her around at night anyway.”

“Look, Hajime,” said Hitomi, “I’m totally okay with being your chauffeur if I have to. I’ll drive you around whenever I have the time, so *please*, stop riding your creaky old bicycle around when you’re dressed like *that*.”

“Do my ears deceive me, Hitomi, or did I just hear you belittle my beloved Dame Dolor? You know that the dissonance of her cursed melody has the power to tear the souls of all who hear it to shreds, don’t you?”

“That’s just the sound of its brakes squealing,” Hitomi sighed.

“Plus,” Kiryuu continued, ignoring Hitomi’s point entirely as he leaned back into his seat. He turned toward her and locked his eyes, one black and one crimson, onto hers. “I can’t have you becoming my chauffeur. I don’t want you to be my legs—I want you to be one of my *wings*. That’s your role, and everyone else’s too. You’re all my wings, and you’re all vitally important for it. Never forget that.”

Hitomi fell into silence, and Kiryuu spoke up once more. “The twelve wings of sable darkness: *Fallen Black*. You will be indispensable to me if I’m to have any hope of getting by in this Hell on earth I’ve fallen from grace into.”

“Yes, okay, I get it,” said Hitomi with a slightly strained smile as she started her car up. She looked carefully in front of the car, then behind, even though it was the middle of the night and absolutely nobody else was remotely nearby the abandoned parking lot. Finally, she stepped on the gas, sending the car trundling off into the darkness.

This is the story of a self-proclaimed fallen angel—an angel that descended to Earth and lived his life in this mortal coil.

To tell his story, however, one must also tell the story of a woman who played an indispensable role in his life. Her name was Saitou Hitomi, and at the time our tale is set, she was in her fourth year of college, at the height of her job hunt. Once, though, she belonged to the same club as Kiryuu Hajime—the Senkou High literary club—and ever since he’d run out from the Kanzaki household a year beforehand, she had become closer to him than anyone else could claim to be.

Chapter 1: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the First of the Twentieth Year

I do not love the darkness.

It's the darkness that loves me to death.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

It happened one year earlier.

"I dropped out of college and ran away from home, so lemme crash at your place."

Those were the first words that Hajime spoke to me after two years of no contact between us whatsoever. After we'd graduated from high school, he'd sort of just gradually fallen out of touch, but now there he was, standing in the doorway to my apartment for reasons I couldn't even begin to fathom. *I*, meanwhile, was still standing in the entryway, completely petrified. The silence was broken only by the sound of rain pounding away at the roof overhead.

Umm...what? Does he think his conclusion follows from the premises? H-He wants to stay here?

I paused to take a closer look at Hajime's face. At his black hair. His black eyes. His tiny little black sunglasses, worn just askew enough to make you wonder if they even helped block the sunlight out at all. His long, black coat that just *screamed* "look at me, I'm a gigantic edgelord!"

Yeah, he definitely still likes black, doesn't he? I thought to myself. He'd been that way back when we were in high school as well, but Hajime looked maybe even a shade darker than usual today, probably on account of the fact that he was sopping wet. His hair and clothes were both completely soaked, and he was dripping water all over the place. It was one of the worst sort of rainy days, where the wind was strong enough to send the rain flying right in your face, and he'd apparently been walking around outside without even an umbrella to

protect him.

There's an expression in Japanese to describe a certain shade of black—"the color of a wet crow." I'm pretty sure it's usually used in a positive light—to describe how pretty the color of a girl's hair is, for instance—but the sopping-wet blackness that Hajime had going on felt evocative of the phrase in an altogether different light. He had an eerie, almost demonic sort of aura about him, in spite of the fact that he'd been out in the frigid rain for so long that he was probably in danger of freezing to death on the spot.

"J-Just come inside for now! You can use my shower!" I said, ushering him in. I just couldn't bear to see him like that and let him into my house without a second thought.

If you were to ask me what sort of person Kiryuu Hajime was, I'd probably say something along the lines of "completely inscrutable."

I don't mean to brag—though I know it's probably going to come across like that anyway—but back in high school, I'm pretty sure I spent more time with Hajime than any of the other girls around us. We were only actually in the same class for our first year, but we spent all three years of high school together in the literary club. But even after all that, he had remained as inscrutable as ever.

It felt like the closer I drew to him, the more he withdrew from me, and that irritated me to no end. It felt a little like Hajime was a dense fog, or a mirage. He was easy enough to pick out from a distance, at least to a certain extent, but the moment you moved closer to him, he'd dissipate before your very eyes. You could never grasp the complete picture of who he was.

None of that's to say that Hajime was an outcast. The girls at our school were certainly pretty fond of him, and the boys and teachers seemed to like him decently enough as well. He was definitely the sort of person whom the people around him tended to keep a healthy distance away from, though.

"My hobby? People watching. My personal motto? 'Among the heavens and Earth, I stand unrivaled.' My favorite color? The vivid red of freshly cleaved flesh, the instant before blood begins to well from the wound. My favorite deadly sin? Pride. My favorite DIO? The one in Part 6."

Believe it or not, *that's* how he chose to introduce himself during the very first homeroom of our first year, right after we got into high school. So...yeah, it's not like I couldn't understand *why* people kept their distance from him. Everyone was completely dumbfounded at the time, and it was the most weirdly intense atmosphere I'd ever felt in a classroom. But the thing is, *nobody* laughed at him. He recited the whole spiel with an air of absolute seriousness, and he gave off a strangely powerful sense of pressure that made it clear we weren't *allowed* to laugh or ridicule him.

He chose to attend the literary club throughout his high school years—a club that, if he *hadn't* joined it, would have been summarily disbanded on account of all of its former members having graduated. And, by what I can only assume was some quirk of fate, I ended up deciding to enroll in the very same club.

While Hajime borrowed my shower, I gathered up his wet clothes and threw them into my washing machine. His coat wasn't machine-washable, of course, so I patted it down with a towel and hung it up to dry out the rest of the way. I was *pretty* sure that's how you're supposed to deal with that sort of clothing, anyway. Then I paused for a moment.

I guess I just picked up his underwear like it was nothing, huh? I reflected. *So that's what they're like. They've got a hole in the front and everything...* “I-I'll leave a towel on top of the washer!” I called out in a much shriller voice than I'd intended. I could feel my cheeks starting to heat up, and I fled the changing room without waiting for Hajime to reply.

I lived in a two-room apartment that had been built about a decade ago and was intended as student housing. The bathtub and shower were in their own room, connected to a changing room with a washing machine totally separate from the toilet—that last point had been a major priority for me when I was house-hunting. I'd started living on my own right after I got into college, and this apartment had been my home for the two years since.

I didn't remember ever having told Hajime my address, by the way, but when I brought that up with him later, he explained that he'd memorized it off the New Year's card I'd sent him the year before. Incidentally, he'd never sent me a card in return. That had really stung at the time—I'd handwritten mine, and I'd

drawn little pictures on it and everything—but that was all water under the bridge now. I had different priorities: namely, stepping into my room and doing a hurried cleaning sweep.

I gathered up all the magazines and textbooks and stuff that were lying on my table and stowed them in my school bag. The clothes and underwear I had hanging up to dry got shoved into the closet, after which I grabbed one of those little adhesive cleaning rollers that I kept tucked away in the corner of the room and gave my carpet a frantic once-over.

As I rolled away at the carpet, the mirror I kept on my table caught my attention. It was one of those little ones that you use for putting on makeup—I'd used it for that exact purpose myself that morning, and I'd forgotten to put it away. I saw myself in the mirror. I saw my face, one eye clamped tightly shut.

"Hey, Hitomi!"

"Eeek?!" I shrieked as Hajime's voice rang out behind me.

"You got a pair of pants I can borrow or something?"

"Huh...?" I grunted, turning around to look at him. "A pair of—wha?!"

And then I was left speechless. There, in full view of my one open eye, stood Hajime, a towel wrapped around his waist—that is to say, he was wearing *nothing* on his upper body. His skin was slightly flushed, and faint wisps of steam trailed up from his torso. Considering how skinny he was, I was surprised by how muscular he looked—especially his abs, which were beautifully toned.

Oh, wow, just look at the body on this guy—wait, no! "Wh-Wh-Wh-Why're you half-naked?! Put some *clothes* on!" I shrieked, without sparing so much as a thought to how much of a nuisance I was being to my neighbors. *Oh, god, my face is burning up now! I'm blushing way harder than I did when I picked his underwear up!*

"Huh?" grunted Kiryuu. "You're the one who threw all my clothes in the washer, aren't you? What am I supposed to wear?"

Oh. When he put it that way, I really had forgotten to prepare an outfit for him to wear in the meantime. I'd been so preoccupied with getting my underwear off the drying line, I hadn't even considered it. "Th-Then at least

wear your coat! It's hanging up right over there!" I shouted.

"A coat and nothing else? What am I, a flasher?" sighed Hajime. His face was slightly flushed as well, but that was only because he'd just gotten out of the bath. His attitude made it clear that he was as calm as could be, and the fact that I was the only one freaking out about all this was starting to piss me off a little. "Why're you kicking up a screaming fit over a topless guy, anyway?" Hajime asked. "You know that sort of reaction's only cute when teens do it, right?"

"Ugggh," I moaned. "W-Wait just a second. I'll grab some sweats for you."

I somehow managed to calm myself down a little as I rifled through my dresser for something that would fit him. *Stay cool, stay cool! It's all right, it's all right! This is no different than seeing your dad topless*, I told myself, only to get so distracted by my inner monologue I accidentally pulled open my underwear drawer. *Nope. no good. I'm freaking out. Come on, I just bought those sweats! I think I put them two drawers up, or some—*

"Oh, huh. So that's how girls store their undies? Looks like a box of fancy chocolates or something."

Then I let out a strangled gasp and chucked my sweats directly in the face of the half-naked man who'd walked over behind me while I wasn't paying attention.

My sweats were designed for women, of course, but they were also supposedly one-size-fits-all, and they ended up fitting Hajime just fine. The arms and legs were just a little short for him, however, and they ended about halfway down his calves and forearms.

"I spin-dried your clothes and hung them up," I explained as I handed him a cup of tea I'd just brewed. "They should be dry enough for you to wear by tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Hajime as he accepted the cup. "This kinda takes me back. You used to brew us tea basically every day back when we were in the literary club."

"Not because I *wanted* to. I just always ended up doing it because you never

even considered brewing the tea yourself,” I replied.

“Right, because I wanted to drink *your* tea,” Hajime said, then took a sip from his cup. “Yup—as good as ever. You’re not rusty at all.”

“Fresh from the teabag,” I sighed. “It would taste the same no matter *who* brewed it. You know that, right?”

“Bwa ha ha!” Hajime cackled in that same dry, peculiar way he always did.

I reflected for a moment on how little he’d changed since then. It was our first time seeing each other in two years, but the conversation came so naturally that it felt like we’d been hanging out just the day before. It almost felt like I’d been transported right back to my high school days, even. To the time when I was still a teenager. The time before I’d grown up.

“Oh, right,” said Hajime. “Speaking of the literary club, looks like my little sister ended up going to our old high school.”

“Oh, she went to Senkou?”

“Right.”

“Huh. It almost feels like destiny, doesn’t it?” I said. I’d dropped the word “destiny” pretty casually, upon reflection. It’s a girl thing, I think—we just feel the urge to use that word at times like these, without really meaning it in a particularly deep or weighty sort of way.

Or, at least, *I* didn’t mean it that way. Hajime, on the other hand, nodded gravely. “Yes, that’s right. We and everyone else in this world are trapped within a casket called destiny, made to wallow in its endless cycle,” he said, the corners of his mouth twisting into a mirthless sneer.

Once again, I found myself thinking that he really hadn’t changed at all. Not in his looks, nor in his cringey chuuni mannerisms—he was exactly like he’d been back in high school through and through. Of course, I could’ve guessed that the second I’d seen his trench coat and sunglasses.

“I haven’t asked what club she’s joining,” Hajime continued, “but you never know—maybe she’ll end up in the literary club. She’s not much of an athlete, unlike me.”

“Yeah, makes sense,” I said, stopping myself before I could carry on and tell him that the two of them had always struck me as not being very alike. I didn’t know the details, but I was aware that Hajime and his sister were only half-siblings.

His name was *Kiryuu* Hajime, but everyone else in the household he lived in had the surname Kanzaki. They were the Kanzaki family, for the most part—Hajime was the odd man out. That included the sister we were discussing, of course. You’d think that would’ve been uncomfortable for him, but he never seemed to consider taking on the Kanzaki name himself. Not sharing a name with the rest of his family had certainly earned him some unappreciated attention over the years, but he stubbornly refused to change his mind. It was like he was rebelling against the world at large—like he was asserting his own individuality.

“Oh, right... She’s probably still pissed at me, actually. You wouldn’t believe how mad she got when I left,” Hajime muttered, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

“Hey...Hajime?” I said. This seemed like as good of a time as any to ask. “Did something happen?”

Hajime didn’t say a word. His gaze fell to the floor, and a thick, heavy silence descended on the room along with it. It felt like time had slowed down to a crawl as that silence stretched on, until finally, he raised his head and looked me in the eye.

“Hitomi,” Hajime said. “If I asked you to let me stay here a while and not question why, what would you say?”

The look in his eyes was absolutely serious and unwavering. He was a man whose gaze carried an unmistakable spark of insight, and having it directed at me so unflinchingly was a little scary, and a little, well...umm, let’s say embarrassing.

“Yeah, okay,” I agreed before I even knew what I was saying. I was honestly sort of exasperated with just how readily I’d given him the okay. I, Saitou Hitomi, turned into a doormat whenever Hajime entered the picture. When all was said and done, it was pretty clear that I was happy to reunite with him.

Happy to reunite with him, and happy to see that he was willing to rely on me.

In the end, I wound up sleeping in my bed while Hajime took the couch. He must have been exhausted too, since he was out like a light the moment he lay down to go to sleep.

Couldn't you be at least a little nervous about sleeping in a girl's apartment? I sighed. I was starting to feel sillier and sillier for being so nervous about all this, considering that *he* clearly wasn't freaking out in the slightest. I definitely wasn't quite happy with how all of this had turned out, but I still went to the trouble of finding a blanket to drape over him. Then I climbed into bed, pulled the covers over my head, and attempted to will myself to sleep.

All right, bedtime! You've got a class first period tomorrow, so you'll regret it if you don't sleep now! One sheep, two sheep, three sheep...

“...”

Nope! Not happening! Seriously, how on earth was I supposed to sleep in a situation like *that*? A guy and a girl sharing a tiny little apartment all alone? You'd have to be crazy to *not* be nervous about that!

I laid a hand on my chest and felt my heart pounding like a drum. It was *very* much aflutter. I found myself descending into a delusional fantasy about Hajime sneaking over the moment I fell asleep and pouncing on me, then descended into self-loathing the moment I really registered what it was I was fantasizing about.

“Ugggh,” I moaned, writhing about under my covers. I poked my head out and looked over at the couch where Hajime was sleeping...and sleeping quite soundly, much to my irritation. I almost got up to find a pen and scribble on his face, but I decided against it in the end out of fear of what he'd do in retaliation.

As I gazed at his face, I was once again taken back to our time in high school together. I raised a hand to my closed eye and gently pressed a fingernail into my eyelid, giving it a light scratch. I felt a faint twinge of pain from that eye—the eye that had lost its ability to see.

Then, suddenly, I got up, opened up one of my dresser drawers, and pulled out an accessory case. I opened it up to find a black leather eye patch. It was very obviously not the sort of eye patch that people wore for medical purposes—no, this was an eye patch designed purely for the sake of fashion. It was also a keepsake of the time I'd spent with Hajime. He probably didn't think much of it at all, honestly, but I'd kept it close at hand for all these years and considered it meaningful for my own reasons.

As I picked up the eye patch, it felt like an old photo album buried deep within my memories had just flopped open on its own initiative. Inside were my memories of my first year in high school—of the time when I had despised Kiryuu Hajime with all my heart and soul.

Chapter 2: Kiryuu Hajime—The Fifteenth Year

Precious few humans truly long for happiness.

Nay, the bulk of humanity wishes only to escape from misfortune.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Let's turn the page back to six years earlier.

Ever since I was a little girl, I had always detested eye patch characters. They come up all the time in anime and manga—characters who either wear an eye patch or keep one of their eyes hidden for whatever reason, I mean—and they'd always annoyed me to no end.

Actually, it'd probably be more accurate to say that I hated the sort of people who *liked* characters like that. I could deal with the characters themselves, but the people who got all worked up whenever one of them showed up in a story just pissed me off like you wouldn't believe. They'd be all "eye patches are so hot" or "eye patches are so cool," and the moment those words came out of their mouths, I'd develop an instant and personal distaste for them.

And people who wore eye patches like some sort of cosplay prop? *They* could just drop dead as far as I was concerned. *Like, what the actual hell? Why don't you assholes try going blind in one eye for real—see how you like it then!* I can't tell you how many times I found myself thinking along those lines.

Why did I have such an intense opinion when it came to eye patches? Honestly, the explanation's incredibly simple: it was because I myself was one-eyed.

When I was little, I got really sick and ended up losing vision in my right eye. I've been getting along with just my left eye ever since then. My eyesight on that side is perfectly good, thankfully, and only having one functional eye isn't enough to cause me any real problems in my day-to-day life. Or, at least, it doesn't cause me any problems in terms of my ability to see. In terms of my

appearance, however, it's caused me quite a fair share of grief.

My sightless eye is, frankly, a horror to look at. The illness that did it in left it looking like a dull, off-white orb, in the least pleasant way possible. Even after I got into high school, I still couldn't bear to stand before a mirror, open both eyes, and look myself in the face. To put it plainly, my eye was just, well...revolting. That's why I made a point of wearing my hair down and letting it drape over my right eye. I also kept that eye constantly closed, just in case somebody accidentally caught a peek. I first became consciously aware of how other people saw me and my eye around the time I started middle school, and I'd kept that habit up ever since.

At first, I'd tried making a routine of wearing an eye patch. I gave that up pretty quickly, though, on account of the fact that eye patches have a way of drawing people's attention. Whether at school or in town, I'd always catch people whispering as they walked past me. They'd wonder if I had a sty, or they'd talk about how they'd always wanted to try wearing an eye patch...or they'd talk about how I was a total chuuni. And then they'd laugh.

Every time it happened, I felt a boiling rage deep within me. Thanks to *some people* who thought that an eye patch would be the perfect prop for their *stupid* games, people who actually *needed* to wear them got ridiculed! *I'll get even someday! I swear I won't let this stand!*

"Not that there's anything I can actually *do* to get even," I would tell myself. "This is just my own stupid bias making me lash out, and I know it." Forcing myself to calm down and put it into words like that would always help, at least a little, and I'd let out a sigh.

The entrance ceremony and our first homeroom had ended, meaning that my first day in high school had come to a close. I immediately set out for the first floor, where I'd find the literary club's room. I didn't have any big, complicated reason for joining that club in particular; I just liked novels, that was all. I'd been reading a lot of Akutagawa Ryunosuke at the time—my personal favorite of his was *The Nose*.

There was just one factor that gave me pause. When I went to turn in my club

application to the literary club's advisor, Miss Satomi, she said something I couldn't quite explain: "Oh...are you one of *his* friends?" I had no idea what she was talking about, so I just shook my head, and she followed it up by saying, "You're not? Okay, then. Hmm... Meh, it'll be fine. Sometimes you just gotta take what youth dishes out to you." Then she nodded and took my application without any further comment.

And so, it was with a mixture of anxiety and anticipation that I pulled open the door to the literary club's room. "Excuse me!" I called out as I stepped inside and bowed politely. "My name is Saitou Hitomi, and I'm a first-year student in class one!"

Okay, time for the hard part. I knew from experience that it would be for the best to cut to the chase and explain about my eye right away. I looked up, ready to do just that...and I was struck speechless.

Within the literary club's room was a single student—a boy. He was sitting on the table, and he gave me a languid glance as I stared at him in horror. It was *him*, of all the people: Kiryuu Hajime, a boy from my class. Specifically, the boy who sat just one seat ahead of me, and the boy who'd delivered the most excruciatingly cringey self-introduction I'd ever seen! His presence in the room alone was more than enough to astonish me, but it got worse: at that very moment, Kiryuu was wearing an eye patch. He'd had both eyes open just fine back in the classroom, but now he felt the need to block one of them off.

To make matters even *worse*, this wasn't one of those square eye patches that they give out at hospitals. His was made from what looked like black leather, and it had some kind of design sewn around its edges with silver thread, plus a weird mark right in the middle of it. It was tied around his head with some sort of belt instead of a string, and was clearly meant to look super stylish on the whole. It was *obviously* not an eye patch that was intended for medical use, and I knew what *that* meant all too well.

"Oh hey, welcome. You here to join the club?" asked Kiryuu with an amiable smile. He'd always looked so sullen in class that I was a little shocked to see him wearing such a friendly and welcoming grin. While I was frozen stiff with shock, he stood up and walked over to me...

“Ah! Ugh...*aaahhh!*”

...then, suddenly, he stopped and clapped a hand to his eye patch.

“C-Curses...! Not now, of all times!” spat Kiryuu, his face twisted into a pained grimace and his teeth gritted. “Agh, damn it all...cease this throbbing! Now is not the time!”

I just stared at him, my expression blank.

“R-Run away,” he whispered in a hoarse, agonized voice. “Run as fast and far as you can, now! Ugh...”

It was a pretty intense order to give someone, that’s for sure, but I couldn’t help but notice the way he kept glancing over at me as he said it, watching for my reactions. *Yeah, this is just...ugh. Ugggh. He’s a case study. It couldn’t be anything else.*

“My evil eye! The *seal!* Aaaagh!”

Oh, wonderful, he’s going with the evil eye story now. As I gazed down at Kiryuu, watching him groan and writhe for all he was worth, I found myself feeling oddly calm and cold, like my blood had turned to ice. No, colder than that—*dry* ice. The sort of cold that’s so extreme it wraps around and feels burning hot instead.

“The pain... Ahh, gaaah...”

Finally, he seemed to lose patience with me and my complete refusal to react to him. He stopped writhing, lowered his hand from his “evil eye,” and stood up. He wasn’t totally finished with the act, though, and he immediately started huffing and puffing like he’d just run a marathon.

“Hah, hah...pew. My bad,” he gasped. “Looks like the seal is getting weaker. I’ll have to talk *him* into making me a new eye patch soon.”

I did *not* reply. Kiryuu hesitated for just a second, then continued.

“Guess you’ve seen me at my worst now,” he said, his forced smile laced with pathos. It was the sort of reaction that you’d expect from a tragic hero who’d let the cursed power he’d tried to keep hidden run wild...and frankly, I had to concur. I suspected I *had* just seen him at his worst, though not necessarily in

the way he meant it. “My name is Kiryuu Heldkai— Ah, no. I shouldn’t be using *that* name on this side. You can go ahead and call me Kiryuu Hajime.”

“...”

“What’s wrong? Too scared to speak? Well, I’ve done it now... I didn’t mean to frighten you, I promise.”

“...”

He was obnoxious. Profoundly, infuriatingly obnoxious. Each and every word that came out of that man’s mouth managed to rub me in *just* the wrong way and leave me fuming. If my sensitive subjects were a minefield, then he was tap-dancing his way across it.

“Hmm? Why’re you hiding your eye? Paying homage to Kitaro, the yokai? Or maybe to Sanji?” asked Kiryuu, stepping closer and leaning in to take a closer look at my bangs. It took him a second to notice that I had my eye closed, but when he finally did, he gasped. “No...don’t tell me *you* have an ev—”

He never got to finish that sentence. For all I knew, he might’ve been trying to say that I have an evanescent charm or an evocative smile. I’d never find out, in any case, because the second I concluded that he was about to say “evil eye,” I kneed him. And I don’t mean lightly—I mean I grabbed him by the shoulders and drove my knee *right* up into his gut with all the force I could muster. I drove that knee home with so much momentum that my other leg actually cleared the ground for a second, so I guess it was more of a jumping knee strike than anything else.

“*Gwahaugh!*” Kiryuu gasped, then fell to his knees, clutching at his solar plexus. His groans had a note of realism to them now that they’d been lacking a moment before, and he was twitching sporadically.

I, meanwhile, just looked down at him. It was almost astonishing how calm I felt, though the small part of me that could look at things objectively was aware that I’d snapped. And I mean *completely* snapped, for the first time in my life. Apparently, I’m the sort of person who shifts into a calm state of mind when I completely flip my lid.

“Y-You little...” moaned Kiryuu. Apparently, my once-in-a-lifetime jumping

knee strike had landed a critical hit on him and rendered him incapable of even standing up. He *was* looking at me, though—glaring, really, with an incredible amount of malice packed into his expression. I felt a chill race down my spine, but in my current state, I couldn't have cared less.

I had *snapped*. I felt like I could go Super Saiyan right then and there. I took up an imposing stance, looked down at him one last time, and shouted, "Drop dead!" Then I spun around and left the room, slamming the door so hard behind me you'd think I was trying to break it.

"You...seriously? You want to quit your club? Aren't you still in your trial period with it, anyway?"

The very next morning, I got to school, marched right on over to the staff room, and demanded that Miss Satomi remove me from the literary club's roster. She sounded more than a little irritated about it, but I was resolved.

"Am I? Okay, then I won't drop out—I'll just cancel my admission. Please pretend that I never turned in my application at all," I replied, taking great care to stay calm and composed.

Miss Satomi frowned, then sank into thought. "Well, see, the thing is, I already turned that in to the vice principal. Man, this is gonna be a pain," she groaned. I was starting to realize just how lazy she was. When I'd arrived at the staff room, she'd been fast asleep at her desk, wearing an eye mask with "REM" printed on it. I figured that my waking her up had probably put her in a bad mood.

"Why didn't you warn me, Miss Satomi?" I asked. "You could've told me that *he's* the literary club's only member right now!"

I'd done a bit of digging since my encounter with Kiryuu, and I'd learned that at the end of the last school year, all of the literary club's members had quit the club together. It hadn't been a very active club to begin with, from the sound of it, and when all the third-years graduated, the remaining members had taken the opportunity to go their separate ways as well. Normally, a club in that sort of position would've been suspended or taken off the books outright, but Kiryuu's decision to join had granted it a lease on life.

Miss Satomi, incidentally, had apparently been forced into the position of club advisor by her superiors. That might've explained why she was pursing her lips at me in a pouty sort of way. "Well, you didn't ask!" she said. "I figured you were joining the club *because* you knew he was in it."

"No, I was *not*!" I snapped, letting my tone escalate a bit further than I probably should've. But, I mean...just, come *on*! She was saying that I'd joined *because* he was in the club, which made it sound...like I was... "Y-You're making it sound like I have a *thing* for him or something!"

"Yeah, that's pretty much what I figured."

"I do *not*!"

"Okay, okay, settle down. I don't think that joining a club for that sort of reason's necessarily a bad thing! Think of all the girls who join soccer clubs as managers—every one of 'em's just looking for a date when all's said and done, right?"

"Some of them just like soccer!" *Probably*. Regardless, we were going off topic. I paused for a second, then spoke up again. "So, what sort of student is that weir—is Kiryuu?" I asked.

"Hmm," Miss Satomi muttered. She looked a little conflicted. "Kinda hard to put it into words, honestly. I mean, he's not a *normal* student, that's for sure."

"He said that his hobby was 'people watching,' remember? I don't think there are that many guys out there who could manage to be as cringey as him."

"Yeah, I gotta agree with you on that one," Miss Satomi sighed. "All the cringe aside, though, he's *not* actually an idiot. His grades were great in middle school, and he's athletic too. Oh, did you know? Apparently, Kiryuu made it all the way to nationals for the high jump back in middle school."

"Oh, huh." I thought that was pretty amazing, honestly, but I didn't think much more of it than that. I'd always been an indoorsy sort of person, so I didn't really care much about that sort of stuff.

"I guess he placed third or fourth or something, but in a certain sense, he ended up becoming even more famous than the guy who won," Miss Satomi explained. I was confused at first. "See, some magazine or something decided

to interview him, and they asked him why he'd chosen the high jump as his event. He answered 'Because the heavens are there.'"

"..."

"Then he went out of his way to explain that 'heavens' could refer to both the sky and the afterlife, for whatever reason, and said something like 'When I take flight, I am driven by my longing to return to that holy embrace' and 'My heart sings the instant I break free from the chains of gravity that bind me to this planet.' He just kept going too—one-liner after one-liner."

"..."

"Apparently, he actually ended up earning a nickname after all that. A few of the people who were there started calling him 'Prince Fancypants.'"

I think that was less a nickname and more them making fun of him, actually. It was clearer than ever that I'd been reading him right this whole time. He really was one of the people I despised above all others: a chuuni.

"Why would someone like *him* join the literary club?" I asked. "Wouldn't he have been better off doing track and field again?"

"Beats me," said Miss Satomi. "I only know about all of this from rumors—I haven't actually talked with him very much at all yet. The rumors *did* say that when somebody asked him why he'd quit track and field, he said that he was 'sick of getting called Prince Fancypants.'"

It seemed, then, that he had a surprisingly sensitive side. That meant that he wasn't looking for laughs with his whole persona—he genuinely believed that it was cool. That, ironically, made the Prince Fancypants title feel like it fit him better than ever.

"Not sure why he joined the literary club," continued Miss Satomi. "I just know that it caused me an awful lot of grief. Way to dump more work into my lap, kid! The club was gonna get suspended until he just had to go and show up," she groaned, leaning as far back into her chair as it would let her and staring up at the ceiling. Then she looked back down at me and sat up, just a little. "I've got a question for you now, Saitou. Did something happen yesterday?"

“Not really,” I replied, breaking eye contact. I didn’t want to think about what had happened, if at all possible.

“I’m asking ’cause when I went out to patrol around the school, I found him on the ground, clutching at his gut.”

“O-Oh, really? H-Huh, weird,” I said, doing my damndest to keep my voice from cracking and largely failing. I could just *tell* I looked as shifty as could be.

“I tried to ask him what had happened, but he just kept moaning something about his ‘Eight Trigrams Seal’ and wouldn’t explain anything to me.”

Meaning that he’d kept quiet about what I’d done to him. I couldn’t say for sure whether he was trying to keep me from getting in trouble or was just too embarrassed to admit that he’d been taken out by a bookworm like me, though.

“I guess he was still in pain this morning, though—he called in to say that he was stopping by the hospital before coming to school.”

“...”

N-No way, right? I didn’t mean to hit him that hard... Okay, no, I did. I put my everything into that knee. Suddenly, I was feeling both regretful and more than a little guilty. Wh-Wh-What should I do...? Stuff like this isn’t funny when people end up with lasting injuries because of it! Am I going to get suspended for this...?

In spite of all those doubts, one thing remained as true as ever: I still couldn’t stand him. I couldn’t let him off the hook for what he’d done—for who he was.

“I’m not gonna ask what happened,” Miss Satomi said, letting out a sigh as droplets of cold sweat rolled down my back. “But anyway, like I said, you’re still in the trial period for now. Can’t you just put off deciding if you want to quit for a little while longer?”

I didn’t reply, so Miss Satomi continued. “Just one week, okay? If a week passes and you still want to quit, come back to me and I’ll see what I can do.”

After all that, I couldn’t talk my way out of her proposal. I knew that my decision wasn’t going to change, though, whether I waited a week or a year.

Just *thinking* about being in a club with that guy was enough to trigger my gag reflex.

Of course, the fact that I'd injured him meant that I probably wasn't in any position to be saying that sort of stuff. Maybe I should've been putting together a get-well gift basket and delivering it to his door as a gesture of remorse. Or maybe it would turn out that his parents were bigwigs in the PTA, and I'd get chased out of the school entirely. *O-Or maybe his parents are part of the yakuza or a gang or something, a-a-and I'll get forced to star in some sort of illicit, underground porno...*

And so, I spent the first half of the day's worth of classes trembling in fear as my delusions spiraled further and further into the realm of the outlandishly implausible. Then, partway through our fourth period math class, the classroom door clattered open, and Kiryuu Hajime himself stepped inside. Normally, when students were late to class, they'd sheepishly slink in through the door at the back of the classroom, but not him. No, he strode in through the front door like he owned the place.

Our teacher certainly wasn't a fan of his outrageous attitude and scowled at him, but they made no effort in particular to reprimand him. "No need to explain—I've already been informed. Hurry up and sit down," our teacher curtly spat.

Kiryuu, however, ignored those orders. He ignored our teacher entirely, in fact, instead looking out over the classroom. He had a surly frown on his face, glaring at us like the king of a nation contemptuously judging his subjects, making no effort to disguise the fact that he was looking down on us. Finally, his pointed gaze fell upon me and stopped. I felt my heart skip a beat...and for the record, it wasn't in the falling-in-love sort of way. I was just startled, that's all.

The moment our eyes met, Kiryuu made a beeline across the classroom and stopped right in front of me. "We need to talk," he said, grabbing me by the arm.

"Wh-What?" I stammered.

"Look, just come with me," said Kiryuu, ignoring my state of complete and

utter confusion and dragging me along after him. He pulled me right out of the classroom, making not even the slightest pretense at subtlety. It was like he was laughing in the dumbfounded faces of our teacher and classmates. I really, *really* hate that this thought even crossed my mind, but I have to admit—it felt ever so slightly like he was a valiant prince and I was the princess he’d set his heart upon carrying off with him.

By the time I’d recovered from my confusion, Kiryuu had brought me all the way up to the rooftop. It seemed that the area had been deliberately opened up to the student body—it was full of carefully maintained flowerbeds and conspicuously handmade benches.

“Wh-Wh-What are you planning?!” I asked, putting on a bold front. I knew that the second I showed any sign of weakness it was over for me, so I did my best to sound as fearless as I could manage, but my voice definitely broke into a falsetto halfway through anyway. “I-If you’re coming to me to g-get even, then I think you’re marking up the... I mean, you’re barking up the wrong tree!”

Yeah, okay...I was definitely in a total panic. I was acting like one of those boss characters who gets less and less intimidating the longer they spend talking. Kiryuu, however, just leaned up against the fence that encircled the rooftop and crossed his arms without saying a word. In fact, he hadn’t said *anything* since he’d dragged me out of the room.

C-Come on, say something! Anything! This silence is way scarier than the alternative! What on earth is he going to do to me? Is he gonna beat the hell out of me? O-Or...no way...i-is he going to take advantage of me somehow? Here, of all places? Th-They call that ‘exhibitionism’ or something, right...?

Kiryuu stayed silent, and in lieu of a response, he unfolded his arms. That slightest of movements was enough to make me jump with surprise, trembling as I reflexively took up some sort of off-brand Chinese kenpo stance. My knees quaked as he stepped up toward me, then gestured at his midsection.

“So, I went by the hospital today,” Kiryuu said.

“S-So what?! D-Don’t you feel pathetic, getting sent to the hospital by a *girl?!?*”

“They took an X-ray. I’ve got two fractured ribs.”

“...”

“I’m wearing a brace and I’m on painkillers, so I’m fine *now*, but I was in so much pain last night that I couldn’t sleep a wink.”

“I am *so, so, sorry!*” I shouted, bowing down at the speed of sound. I’d been dead set on not apologizing to him under any circumstances. I’d sworn an oath to myself not to do it, no matter what, but that resolve crumbled away in an instant. We were way past the point where I could write this off as a joke. I’d broken his *bones*! He was straight-up *injured*! This was a cut-and-dried case of assault! “I-I apologize, really... I didn’t mean to *hurt* you... J-Just don’t make me do any dirty videos, please,” I begged. My mind was leaping to so many different places at once, I didn’t even know what I was saying anymore.

“Bwa ha ha... Bwaaa ha ha ha!”

It happened just like that. Kiryuu, who a second earlier had looked so pained as he clutched at his wounded torso, suddenly couldn’t take it any longer and burst out into laughter.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! Ahh, okay, my bad, seriously. That was all just a joke,” he managed to admit between laughing fits.

“Huh? A...joke?” I repeated, staring at him in stunned astonishment. Kiryuu flipped up his shirt, exposing his completely braceless and bandage-less abdomen. The only thing worth mentioning beneath it were his finely toned abs. “S-So, wait...you were just making all of that up?!”

“Of course I was,” said Kiryuu. “A jumping knee of *that* level could never put *me* down.”

“...”

“My Hierro Skin is the hardest of all the Espadas!”

“...?”

I had no idea what *that* was supposed to mean, but it didn’t really matter anyway. I could tell that I was getting made fun of, and I could feel my face heating up as the rage overtook me. “Y-You tricked me, you jerk!” I shouted.

“Bwa ha ha! Let this be a lesson—maybe you’ll make it a little harder next time!” Kiryuu said with an insufferably smug grin.

“*Arggggh!*” I was so humiliated that it felt like the shame was boiling my brain away. *What is this asshole’s problem?! Agh, I am so, so pissed!* “B-Big talk from the weakling I took out with a single knee!” I snapped. Making fun of him felt like the best that I could do to take my revenge.

Kiryuu, however, just arched an eyebrow. “Huh? Get real, girl. That didn’t work on me at all! Seriously, didn’t even feel it!”

“You’re a filthy liar! I heard that noise you made—you nearly lost your lunch!”

“I am not, and I did not!”

“Weakling! Small fry! You’re a puny little wimp of a man!”

“Why, you little...! I’m gonna tattle on you to our teacher!”

“Ugh!”

That would be a problem for me. It was the worst-case scenario, really. Looking at the situation from a rational perspective, it was plain to see that I had been the aggressor, and that said aggression was totally one-sided. The best-case scenario was that I’d have to write a lengthy letter of apology, and the *worst-case* scenario ended with me getting suspended. *Dammit! What kind of high schooler hides behind his teacher’s authority?! And where does he get off putting on such an intimidating act, then making the pettiest threat possible?!*

I clenched my teeth, unable to come up with any sort of retort, and Kiryuu let out a snort. “While we’re at it,” he said, “the part about me going to the hospital was a lie too.”

“Huh? But Miss Satomi said—”

“Yeah, I just wanted an excuse to come in late today. I made it up. Your knee really *didn’t* do squat to me,” he added, emphasizing it so specifically that I had to assume he was just playing tough. I was starting to suspect that he was a really sore loser.

“So, then, what *were* you doing this morning?” I asked.

Kiryuu's mouth twisted into a mocking smirk. "I was looking into you, Saitou Hitomi."

Looking into...me? What?

"That eye of yours," he said, gesturing at the eye I kept hidden. The eye I kept shut tight. "You're blind in it, right?"

I didn't reply. I wasn't surprised, per se. All of my middle school classmates knew that I was blind in my right eye, and he wouldn't have had to do much asking around to figure out that much. I *was* impressed by his initiative for doing all that digging in the space between yesterday and today, though.

"Yeah, that's right. I can't see with that eye. I can basically tell if it's light or dark out, but as far as actual eyesight goes, it's totally useless," I said in a rather blasé tone. "Ah—don't start getting all sympathetic or anything, please. It doesn't have any real impact on my day-to-day life, and I lost vision in the eye almost a decade ago. I barely even notice it anymore," I added.

I was genuinely sort of shocked by how flat and emotionless my voice was coming out, and I wasn't done yet. "The Kitaro hair's to help me hide the eye," I explained. "Keeping one eye closed all the time tends to weird people out, after all. I *would* hide it with an eye patch..."

I stopped abruptly midsentence to glare at him. It was a one-eyed glare, but a very pointed one nonetheless.

"...if it weren't for the fact that wearing one would make people think I was some sort of *chuuni*," I concluded.

Kiryuu didn't say a word, and I carried on in spite of my better judgment. "Hey, here's a question—do chuunis like you ever even consider the possibility that you're being nuisances? 'Eye patches are so cool,' 'only having one eye's so awesome'... Don't you ever feel at least a *hint* of shame?"

I paused to let him reply, but he didn't, so away I went again. "Oh, I'm not fishing for an apology or anything, so don't even bother! Actually, I'd get mad if you *did* try to apologize! I hate eye patch characters. I hate people who think eye patch characters are cool. And you know what? That means I hate people like *you*. I *despise* them!" I spat, clenching my fists. A chaotic mess of emotions

was roiling deep within my heart.

Throughout all that, Kiryuu hadn't said a word. He was just standing there listening quietly. Finally, after one more pause, he spoke. "So...you know you've totally got the wrong idea about this, right?" he said in a terribly uninterested tone. "You can't see in one eye, and I'm wearing an eye patch. What, exactly, do those two things have to do with each other?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing, right? They're totally unrelated, yet here you are, coming at me swinging. You know how full of yourself that makes you look, right?" said Kiryuu. His gaze was almost frightfully frigid. "Look at it this way—if a police drama does an episode themed around terrorism, is that unfair to all the people out there who've died in terror attacks? Are TV programs about people taking on eating challenges unfair to all the starving people in famine-stricken developing countries? Is putting a pyrokinetic character into a supernatural battle story insensitive toward people who've lost family members in house fires? Are mystery shows where somebody dies in episode after episode after episode disrespectful toward the sanctity of life itself? Are all military geeks just a bunch of ignorant morons who make light of the horrors of war? No way, right?"

Kiryuu let out a sigh. "If you start getting offended by each and every little thing like that, there'll be no end to it. And if something as minor as a character who wears an eye patch is enough to set you off, well, I don't know what to tell you," he added. He just didn't let up on me. His words were as cold as a blade of ice, one that kept piercing my heart again and again. "Saitou Hitomi—everything you just said was nothing more than you lashing out at me over unjustified resentment."

I gasped, and Kiryuu shrugged. "It's your prerogative to hate what you hate. But on the same note, it's everyone *else's* prerogative to like what they like. Just keep in mind that the world's gonna keep on turning regardless of how overinflated your persecution complex gets."

His words carved their way across my heart, one by one, inch by inch. The way he spoke made it seem like he could see right through me, and he drove his

point home with cold, merciless precision. “You realize,” he said, “that nobody’s under any obligation to play along with your complex, right?”

I bit my lip and dropped my gaze to the floor. I couldn’t argue against that. Everything that Kiryuu Hajime had said to me...was right. It was so soundly reasoned, I couldn’t even begin to argue against it. And I *knew*. I *knew* that I was just lashing out. I *knew* it wasn’t anyone’s fault that I was blind in my right eye, and that meant that there was no reason for anyone to play along with my obsession. I had no right to criticize people who thought that eye-patch-wearing characters were cool. Kiryuu was right on the money—I was the one who was being petty by raising such a fuss over something so ultimately insignificant.

On the other hand, though...what’s so bad about lashing out? What’s so bad about resenting the hell out of someone who goes out of his way to seal off an eye that could otherwise see perfectly well?! I was biting down on my lip so hard, I’d almost drawn blood. I was so, so very frustrated, I was on the verge of tears. My blind eye could still cry, at least—for all its worthlessness, at times like these, it always made sure to assert itself.

“Hmm—looks like it’s not *completely* useless after all,” said Kiryuu as I desperately tried to hold it all in. He reached out toward my face, brushing my bangs aside and then wiping away the tear that was pooling in the corner of my right eye. He made it look so darn natural that for a moment, I didn’t even realize what he’d done. The second it *did* register, though, I slapped his hand away as fast as I could.

“Wh-What’s your *problem*?!” I shouted. Kiryuu just flashed a faint smile at me. “Wh...What do you mean, it’s not useless...? You think an eye’s doing its job just because it can cry?”

“I never said that. I’m saying that the way you keep one eye constantly closed is part of what gives you your charm,” replied Kiryuu. He didn’t sound like he was teasing me or mocking me either. His tone was perfectly up-front and natural. “It’s like you’re always winking,” he continued. “It’s cute.”

“Whaugh?!” I gasped. This time, I was positive that my face would catch fire. Pillars of flame were spouting from my eyes.

Wha... Wh-Wh-Wha... What the hell does he think he’s saying?!

“Everything I’ve told you today has been logical. I haven’t been wrong about a single thing,” Kiryuu said, paying no heed to how I was freaking out right in front of him. “But the thing is, there’s always a chance that saying the right thing can still hurt people. People’s instincts and emotions don’t always line up with logic and reason. Take, for instance, the people who claim that violence in manga and video games promotes crime in the real world. People really think that, right? Well, / think that theory’s as dumb as it gets. Like, those people need to stop mixing up fiction and reality, right? If anything, I feel worried about the poor works of fiction that end up getting singled out as the favorite of some criminal! *But*,” he continued, “it’s not really that cut-and-dried, is it?”

“What...?”

“Imagine that somebody really important to you gets murdered, and the murderer turns out to have been really into some violent splatterfest of a video game. It’d be totally understandable for you to lash out against violent games on the whole in response, right?”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but Kiryuu wasn’t done yet anyway. “People can’t suppress their emotions with reason alone. The things that piss you off piss you off, even if you *know* you’re in the wrong for it. You know what I mean, right?” he asked once more.

I still couldn’t bring myself to react, though, much less affirm him. I couldn’t keep up with the incredible about-face that he’d just performed. A minute ago, his expression had been as cold and severe as a block of ice, but now he beamed at me with all the warmth of the sun itself. His smile was so gentle, it felt like he could wrap up the whole earth in its kind embrace.

“The fact that you were lashing out baselessly doesn’t change the fact that I hurt you. The world isn’t going to play along with your complex...so I’ll do it in the world’s stead. And so, I’ll do this,” Kiryuu said, then reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and threw it over to me. I just barely managed to catch it, then I looked down into my hand to find the eye patch that Kiryuu had been messing around with yesterday. A stylish black leather eye patch.

Then, a moment later, my good eye widened with astonishment. This day had thrown surprise after surprise at me, but *this* managed to shock me above all

else. Kiryuu...had bowed down to me. It was a deep bow—a bow of utmost sincerity. “I’m sorry I put you through a bad experience,” he said, his apology lacking so much as a hint of insincerity.

I was dumbfounded, and I could only gape at him. I’d only met him the day before, so I barely knew who he was at all yet, but I’d still already gotten it in my head that he was the sort of person who would never, *ever* bow down to anyone. Or really, I’d been arrogant enough to *assume* that he was that sort of person. And so, when faced with his wholehearted gesture of apology, I was left at a complete loss.

Eventually, Kiryuu straightened back up again and looked down at the eye patch in my hand. “I’ll never wear an eye patch for kicks again. I hope you’ll find it in you to forgive me,” he said. He sounded almost heartbroken, and he looked like he was about to cry. He was acting like a proud warrior who’d been forced to give up his beloved blade.

Okay, but seriously, though. Do you really like messing around with eye patches that much? Why do you look like you’ve just had your heart torn in half? I could only conclude that in his mind, banning himself from ever playing around with an eye patch again was an almost unimaginably weighty punishment. He was imposing it upon himself in an effort to atone for what he’d done to me. It was *complete* nonsense.

“Pff... Heh heh, aha ha ha ha!”

Before I knew it, I was cracking up. It was all just so *stupid*, I couldn’t help myself. Where once I’d lashed out at anyone and everyone who dared to put on an eye patch for fun, where once I’d practically had an allergic reaction to all that chuunibyou stuff, now I couldn’t bring myself to care. The boy before me was just so *funny*, nothing else felt like it mattered.

In Kiryuu’s mind, wearing an eye patch or only having one eye were just cool character traits, plain and simple. He’d never intended to make fun of anyone at all—he was *exclusively* wearing an eye patch in pursuit of his own aesthetic of coolness. He wasn’t even really messing around in the end. He was *completely* sincere about his posing. And yet, in spite of that, he’d felt so sorry about what he’d done that he admitted that he was only doing it for kicks.

One thing was clear: he wasn't a bad person. I clenched my fist around his eye patch, then spoke in as condescending of a tone as I could possibly muster.

"Well, fine, then. I *suppose* I'll forgive you."

A week passed by, the trial period for my club membership came to a close, and I once again made my way to the staff room.

"Hmm," said Miss Satomi, her tone as lackadaisical as ever. "So, this means I can put you down as an official member of the literary club, right?" she asked.

"Right," I agreed.

"Gotcha, gotcha. Good to hear it," Miss Satomi said. "'Kay, next up, I'm gonna need you two to decide who's going to be the president. I have to put it on the books, even if it's just a formality."

"Understood," I replied. "Though to be honest, I'm already pretty sure Hajime's going to end up taking the job."

"*Hajime*, huh...?" said Miss Satomi, raising an eyebrow at me. "You two're getting along pretty well now, aren't you? What happened to all that nasty tension you guys had brewing a week ago?"

"Nothing," I said. "Things are still as tense as ever. Hajime just hates being called by his given name, so I decided to make a point of using it."

"You know, I have as hard a time understanding you as I do Kiryuu," Miss Satomi sighed. "But if things are still so tense, then why'd you decide to stay in the club with him?" She asked, though she didn't really sound particularly interested in hearing the answer.

"I just found a new hobby, that's all," I replied, trying to put on a sarcastic tone.

"A hobby?"

"People watching. Cringey, I know, but it's given me the urge to stick around and spend a little longer watching the weirdest man I've ever met."

"Hah! Well, isn't that just perfect," Miss Satomi said, then pulled her eye mask back down.

And so, Hajime and I kicked off our careers as the literary club's only two members. As for our club's actual activities, well, we didn't have any. Every day, we'd show up to read or make small talk or whatever. Whenever the cultural festival would roll around, we'd put out a little magazine, I guess, but that's about it. He got pretty upset about me calling him Hajime at first, but before long, he'd gotten used to it and had started calling me Hitomi in exchange.

As for his eye patch ban, he kept it up throughout all three years of high school. It seemed that he just couldn't give up on his evil eye act, though, and he ended up wearing these tiny little round sunglasses and a red colored contact instead. Speaking of which, there was one thing that bothered me for a very long time until I finally worked up the nerve to ask.

"Hey, Hajime," I said. "Why did you want me to stay in the club with you, anyway?" In other words: why didn't he just leave me be? "It's not like you *wanted* me to join at first or anything, right? Me joining was just a coincidence, so why didn't you just let me go off and quit? You didn't have to go to the trouble of apologizing—you could've just ignored me."

If he'd just ignored me and my baggage, he would've had the whole room to himself. And if he'd *really* wanted more members for whatever reason, he could've recruited ones who'd be less of a pain in his side.

"Bwa ha ha!" Hajime laughed in response. "I know what you're fishing for. You want me to say something like 'I *needed* you in my club, no matter what,' right?"

"N-No, I *don't*!" I shouted.

"Bwa ha ha ha ha!" he cackled as I turned beet red. "Listen up, Hitomi: life is like a novel that you can only read once."

"Like...*what*?"

"And since I can only read it once, I don't want to skip over a single page. It'd be absurd to skim through your own life! You never know what might be foreshadowing for some big twist down the line. After all, my life's *definitely* going to be an interesting story, and I plan on enjoying it to the fullest."

Once again, I found myself speechless.

“For all I know,” he continued, “meeting you may have been foreshadowing for something too, don’t you think? And if it was, I have my hopes set on it being for something good. Who can say what sort of role you’ll play in the story of my life?”

He kept going on in that general vein for quite a while. In short, once you stripped away all the fancy-shmancy excess of *how* he said it, his explanation more or less boiled down to “YOLO.” He just expressed it in the most obnoxiously roundabout way possible. I didn’t know whether I should call him a fatalist, a romanticist, or just a plain old chuuni.

In any case, I spent three years with that physical manifestation of chuunibyou itself. At first, I was just sticking around out of idle curiosity, but before I knew it, I was more or less always by his side. He made me cringe, and wince, and I could barely even bear to look at him sometimes, but for some strange reason, I also wanted to keep watching him forever. I *never* wanted people to lump me in with him, so I didn’t want to be seen walking around with him, yet somehow, I wanted to walk with him anyway.

Hajime would always smile, like he was enjoying every second of his life, but every once in a while, an ominous look so cold it’d give me chills would come across his face. That, however, just made me more intrigued, more taken with him than ever. And as we lived on as club mates, as I was thinking about him and all his mysteries time after time after time, before I knew it...I had fallen for him.

Hajime was, and continues to be, my first love.

Chapter 3: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Second of the Twentieth Year

Woe be upon the feckless masses, complacent as they are in their ignorance.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

“We need to talk, Hajime!”

It was Monday afternoon, and about a month had passed since that rainy night Hajime had shown up at my house without warning. I’d just arrived back from my morning lecture, and I had been greeted by a sight that got under my skin so badly, I finally couldn’t bear it anymore and shouted with all my might. I turned to face the bum of a man who was sprawled out on his futon, ready to *really* give it to him this time!

“I’ve told you a *thousand* times that your instant ramen cups go in the *kitchen* trash can, not the one in the room! They’ll stink up the place if you throw them out there!”

“...”

“And if you’re not even watching the TV, then turn it off! And shut off the power strip! And don’t keep the lights on during the middle of the day either! Just open the stupid curtains if you want it to be brighter in here!”

“...”

“Gah! Why’s there an empty can *here*?! Arrrgh—*please*, when you’re finished drinking your coffee, *throw the can out*! Don’t just leave it lying on the table!”

“...”

“And you didn’t wash the dishes either! We talked about this last week, didn’t we?! We decided that I’d do the cooking and you would do the dishes in exchange! If you weren’t going to wash them, you could’ve at *least* filled the

sink to soak them!”

“...”

“And *that’s* not even the *half* of—”

“Oh, quit yelling,” Hajime grumbled in an incredibly irritated tone as he flipped over onto his back. He’d been sleeping facedown, and he blinked blearily as he looked up at me, scratched his head, then yawned.

“My yelling is *not* the problem here!” I snapped, glaring at him. It wasn’t very effective, though, and Hajime just sleepily rubbed his eyes in lieu of a response. *Somebody sure has made himself at home here!*

A month ago, Hajime had asked if he could “crash at my place,” and I’d given him the okay without protest. Little did I know that doing so would lead to him acting like he owned the place, and in no time flat! My guest futon had turned into his personal bedroll! And to top it all off, he’d quit college and wasn’t working—not even part-time! He was a dropout bum, no two ways about it. He’d spend all day lazing about in my apartment, go out to play around outside when the whim struck him, eat the food I made, and stick around seemingly indefinitely without even bothering to chip in for my water and electricity bills.

“You’re just a leech at this point, you know that?!”

“Just shut *up* already,” Hajime grumbled as he sat up and returned my glare with a slightly sleepier one of his own. It was a little scary, but I was just as ticked off as he was, and I was determined to hold my ground. “Quit bitching about every last little thing, seriously... You’re not my mom, you know?”

“Then stop making me act like I am and take care of yourself for once!”

“I swear, this is *exactly* the problem with type-A women.”

I-Is he seriously dragging my blood type into this?! He knows I’m really sensitive about all that fortune telling compatibility stuff! Especially the part where he has type-B blood, which supposedly means our compatibility’s awful!

“Anyway, whatever to all that crap. Did you buy this week’s *Jump*, Hitomi?” asked Hajime dismissively.

“Yes, I *did*!” I shouted, then hurled the plastic bag I was carrying at him with

all my strength. Hajime caught it like it was nothing and pulled out the magazine within.

“And the fifty-yen stamp for sending the survey in?”

“It’s in the bag!” I snapped. I had to admit it: I was such a doormat, it was almost enough to bring me to tears.

“Sweet, thanks. Love ya, Hitomi,” Hajime said offhandedly.

Gah! I felt my heart skip a beat in spite of myself. His words almost pierced my heart straight through, but I just barely managed to hold those feelings back. *Don’t give in!* I told myself. *If you let him charm you now, you’ll never break free of this status quo!* I’d come prepared to finally seize the reins in our unbalanced roommate relationship, and I was running through all sorts of plans that would let me do so...when suddenly, Hajime stopped flipping the pages of his magazine and pulled out his phone.

“What is it, Leatia?” he said.

I sighed. *Here we go again.* Hajime had been on a real pretend-phone-call kick this past month. It was an idiosyncrasy of his particular brand of chuunibyou that he’d apparently picked up at some point after we’d graduated high school. *What sort of name is Leatia, anyway? Who’s that supposed to be?*

Hajime spent a couple of minutes spouting cryptic gibberish into his phone, then ended the fake call and stood up. All traces of sleepiness had vanished from his expression—now, a subtle but distinct glint of focus dwelled in his eyes as a gleeful grin spread across his face. He pulled his chuuni-riffic trench coat out from my closet, threw it on with an unnecessary flourishy snap, put in his red contact lens, slid on his tiny sunglasses, then looked over at me to say “I’ll be right back” before striding right past me toward the door.

“Wha— Hey!” I shouted. “We’re not finished talking here! And where are you even going, anyway?”

“To War.” He flung open the door and walked away, as calm and composed as ever. I, on the other hand, was left alone in the room, with nobody left upon which to vent that righteous fury I’d worked myself up into.

Half a year passed by, over the course of which I'd failed to make any changes to the status quo. That's not to say that there weren't *any* positive developments, to be fair—Hajime had made no effort to improve his lifestyle, but he *did* tag in to handle the chores and cooking when I was too depressed to bother or when I got sick. That felt pretty nice, honestly. His family had also started sending him an allowance (*Get a job, you bum!*), so he didn't have to sponge off my finances either. Except for my food expenses and utility bills, I mean—he still wasn't chipping in for those.

The one really unusual element to his lifestyle, though, was how he'd occasionally vanish without warning. Sometimes he'd be back in just three or four hours, and sometimes he'd be out of the house for days on end—three days straight was the current record. I'd ask him what he was doing when he'd leave on those little excursions, but he'd always give me some nonsensical excuse like "heading out to war." Not once had he told me the truth.

It wouldn't be much longer before the truth revealed itself, though: all his talk of war this, war that really *wasn't* cryptic gibberish after all. It was, in fact, the complete and unvarnished truth. The day I discovered what he'd really been up to is a day I'll never forget—the day I left behind the world of the commonplace and set foot in the world of supernatural battles.

It all began when Hajime finally came back home after an unprecedented weeklong absence. I rushed to the door when I heard him knock, taking a moment to compose myself and make sure it wouldn't be obvious how excited I was before I opened it...only to see him standing outside, covered in wounds. His clothes were torn to shreds and had bloodstains all over them. His favorite chuuni-riffic trench coat was in pieces. The patches of bare skin I could make out were sporting cuts and bruises, and a seemingly fresh gash on his forehead was still leaking blood, leaving half of his face painted a vibrant shade of crimson.

"Wh-What *happened* to you?! Were you in a fight?!" I shrieked, then realized a moment later that no, an ordinary *fight* would never have left him in that state. He looked like he'd just barely emerged from an extended battle to the death.

Hajime didn't say anything. He just gave me a vacant look, then collapsed on the spot a second later.

"Wh-What the— Whoa!" I shouted as I just barely managed to catch him before he hit the floor. "A-Are you okay, Hajime?! Seriously, what *happened*?!"

"Hi...tomi..." Hajime rasped. He was completely limp in my arms, and his breath came in short, shallow bursts.

"Hajime, you're...really heavy, actually!" For such a slender guy, Hajime was actually quite muscular, and between that and his height, he wasn't exactly a light load to bear. I, meanwhile, was as much of an unathletic, indoorsy sort of girl as I could possibly be. Just keeping him upright was taking all of my strength, and judging by the way I felt myself sinking downward, I was fighting a losing battle. "Ugggh," I groaned. "No good... Can't...keep this up..."

I mustered up every ounce of strength I had to offer, but that wasn't very many ounces, so I hit my limit before I knew it. Hajime and I tumbled to the floor together—or rather, we *started* to. The next thing I knew, though, something unbelievable happened. All of a sudden, Hajime grew lighter. And not just a little bit lighter—he was so light, it was downright inconceivable. He must've weighed over sixty kilos a second ago, but suddenly, all of that pressure vanished into thin air. I could've held him up one-handed, no exaggeration. Heck, I probably could've *carried* him one-handed! It was almost like gravity had totally ceased to apply to him!

"Wh-Wha...? *How*?" I stammered.

"Bwa ha ha... I went and ate the Float-Float Fruit..." Hajime said, his voice feeble and pained. He'd lost his own personal gravity, and it seemed he was dedicated to lowering the gravity of the situation while he was at it. "You can carry me now, right...? Just...take me to the bed, please. Don't call an ambulance. Just get me some bandages, or band-aids, or whatever..."

"W-Wait a second! I have *no* clue what's happening! Explain yourself! What's going *on*?! " I shouted. The panic was really starting to get to me, and I couldn't help but raise my voice.

"Don't worry. I'll tell you everything," Hajime said, cutting through my bewilderment to reassure me. "Oh, and find me something to eat, thanks. I'm

dying of hunger here,” he added, which honestly sort of deflated the drama of the whole situation.

The Fifth Spirit War: an all-out battle royale in which individuals known as Players fought for supremacy using supernatural powers they’d been granted. The losers would have all knowledge of the War wiped from their memories and be returned to their daily lives. The victors, meanwhile, would move on to their next battle, again and again, until only a select few remained.

“So, yeah, that’s pretty much the gist of it. Any questions?”

It was early morning the next day. Hajime had just finished explaining everything he’d been going through, and he let out a quick sigh. He was sitting on my bed, his arms and abdomen wrapped in bandages, and he had gauze plastered over his cheek. He looked like he was in real bad shape overall, but it turned out that his injuries weren’t as deep as they’d appeared at a glance, and his complexion seemed healthy enough. It seemed it wasn’t the injuries that had made him collapse the night before after all—rather, it was a combination of hunger and sleep deprivation that had done him in. After stuffing his face and getting a full night’s sleep, he was fit as a fiddle again.

“Umm,” I began, then sank into thought. *“Any questions”? Are you kidding me? I have so many questions I don’t even know where to start!* “Okay, so let me see if I have this straight—when you got lighter last night, it’s because you manipulated gravity with...uhh, L-Lucifer—”

“The ironclad hammer of a fallen angel, ready to crush the heavens and the fools who rule them: *Lucifer’s Strike*,” repeated Hajime, tapping on the notebook he’d spread out on the table, which he’d written the name of his power into. It felt like he was telling me to make sure to memorize both the name *and* its lengthy preamble. That notebook, incidentally, was the very same one he’d scrawled all his chuuni delusions into back in high school—or as he called it, the *Reverse Crux Record*.

He couldn’t have made it a little shorter? How am I supposed to remember that? I mean, I know this sort of thing’s right up his aesthetic alley, but still! “Right. Look, can we just skip all the iron hammer stuff and call it ‘LS’ for short?”

I asked.

“Moron. It’s an *ironclad* hammer.”

He called me a moron! Wow! Also, do you really think I care what the hammer’s like?

In any case, this whole *LS* thing was a lot to take in. It seemed Hajime really *did* have a genuine supernatural power dwelling within him. All this stuff about wars, spirits, powers, and *everything* was just so alien to me you’d think I wouldn’t believe it at all, but experiencing his power firsthand the night before had done a lot to boost my level of credulity when it came to this stuff. Once you’ve witnessed something like that firsthand, you can’t *not* believe in it.

Of course, that wasn’t the *only* reason why I believed him. I glanced off to the side at the other big reason, who was currently casually floating in the air, posed as if she were sitting cross-legged on the ground.

“What? Got a problem?” the floating—and apparently belligerent—girl asked as she noticed my gaze. A pair of wings sprouted from her back, and I could only describe her outfit as “a lot.”

“N-Nope, not me! No problem at all, Leatia!” I replied, waving my hands in a frantic show of nonaggression.

Leatia, it seemed, wasn’t human at all. She was a sort of being called a spirit that lived in a totally different world than ours, conveniently known as the Spirit Realm. It was the sort of explanation I’d normally laugh off without a second thought, but when the story was accompanied by an actual spirit right before my eyes, it became a lot harder to dismiss. I mean, she was floating and all, so, yeah. She’d appeared and disappeared out of nowhere right before my eyes too.

“So, uhh, Leatia? I’m guessing that normal people can’t see you, right?” I asked.

“Basically, yeah,” confirmed Leatia. “That’s something I have control over, though, so if I wanted to, I could let them see me just as easily. That’s why you can see me right now.”

“That makes sense,” I said with a nod. “So, uhh, when Hajime’s been talking

on the phone lately, that was...?”

“Yeah, that was me. We use radio waves when we have to get in contact with humans. It’d look weird if someone just started talking to themselves out of nowhere, but it’s totally normal if they do it with a phone in their hand, right?”

“Right... You’ve really thought all this through, huh?”

“I didn’t think all these rules up. The War Management Committee figured them out,” Leatia said a little curtly. She was a pretty brusque person in general, but as I talked with her more, I came to realize that she was surprisingly nice beneath it all. She explained everything in a way that made logical sense, and she answered all of my questions.

“I’m surprised you’re *not* surprised by all this, Hitomi,” Hajime said, giving me a quizzical look.

“I mean, I’m as surprised as anyone would be,” I replied. “But, well...I guess I’m so surprised that nothing can surprise me anymore.”

“The *last* guy I showed her to was all, ‘Hell yeah, monster girl time!’ and got super hyped up.”

Hate to say it, but I’ll never react to anything like that. “So, Hajime...did you come home all beat up last night because you lost a battle in that ‘war’?”

“I didn’t *lose*,” Hajime snapped. “I won, and by a landslide!”

“Can’t believe you have the guts to say that after how close you came to getting your ass beat.”

“Shut the hell up, Leatia,” Hajime growled. I wasn’t exactly sure what to believe, but in any case, it seemed safe to conclude that he had *not*, in fact, lost. A second later, though, it hit me that of course he hadn’t—the fact that he still had his power was proof enough of that.

Broadly speaking, it seemed that there were two conditions that could lead to you getting knocked out of the War:

- Getting killed by another Player.
- Having your Spirit Handler declare that you’ve been taken out of action.

In either case, the player who got knocked out would lose both their power and their memories of everything related to the War. The part about people getting *killed* was pretty freaky, as far as I was concerned, but since all of the people who died in a Spirit War came right back a moment later, it didn't quite feel like "killed" was even necessarily the right word to use. Does a duel to the death count as a duel to the death if its participants know they won't actually die? It seemed a little ambiguous in my mind.

"Did you seriously just tell me to shut up?" asked Leatia, arching an eyebrow. "You'd better watch your mouth, Hajime. You know I can disqualify you from this War whenever I feel like it, right?"

"Try it, then! If you wanna accomplish nothing and get yourself kicked off your precious Committee while you're at it, that is," said Hajime with a smirk.

"Oh, you little piece of—"

"Disqualify' him?" I repeated, cocking my head. That was a piece of jargon I hadn't been exposed to yet.

"Spirit handlers are given the authority to disqualify their Players," Leatia explained. "Basically, it means that if we decide one of our Players isn't fit to fight in the War for whatever reason, we can force them out of it unilaterally."

"Okay...but what does being 'fit to fight in the War' actually mean, specifically?" I asked.

"Imagine if a player decided to use their power to slaughter a bunch of uninvolved bystanders, or if they tried to reveal the existence of the Spirit War to the world at large. The rule's there to let us deal with people like that."

"Oh, I get it," I said with a nod.

"Course, in the end, that's all under the jurisdiction of the War Management Committee," Leatia continued. "If the Committee tells you that you can't disqualify a Player, then you're shit out of luck, and if they tell you that you *have* to disqualify a player, then you can't say no."

The War Management Committee was the organization that Leatia belonged to. It was responsible for managing the Spirit War (bet you never could have guessed that one). The organization comprised both spirits like Leatia, who

were tasked with field work, as well as spirits who stayed back at their headquarters and essentially did office work. Field spirits were each assigned to watch over a number of Players, keep track of the war, work out scheduling issues, and recruit new Players to participate in the battles.

“Hey, Leatia? Can I ask a stupid question?” I said. “Why’re you making people fight like this, anyway?”

I didn’t mean it as an accusation, honestly, but it definitely came out sort of sounding like one. Spirits, by all appearances, seemed to be beings of a higher order than humanity. I couldn’t say that with total confidence, but from everything that I’d heard about them so far, it was certainly the impression I’d gotten. Why would they make lower life-forms like us fight each other? What could they possibly be gaining from this?

“Well, that’s—” began Leatia.

“To gamble on it,” said Hajime, cutting her off. “The Spirit War’s just a big show, and *we’re* the performers.”

“A...*show*?” I repeated, astonished by what I was hearing.

“The spirits watch all of our battles, and not for oversight purposes or anything like that. No, they watch us fight because they *enjoy* it, and while they’re appreciating their little show, they like to bet on who’ll come out on top. It wouldn’t make for much of a spectacle if we were fighting empty-handed, though, and that’s where the powers come into play. They give us the flashiest weapons they can come up with—after all, a supernatural battle trumps an ordinary battle any day,” Hajime concluded with a cynical smirk.

So, this whole battle royale’s just a show? That was a pretty difficult truth to swallow. I couldn’t quite describe exactly how I felt about it, but I was definitely feeling *something* hazy and unpleasant when I considered the implications.

“You spirits are into some pretty messed up shit, y’know that?” said Hajime. “What gives you the right to treat humans like your playthings, huh?”

“‘Huh’ yourself, jackass,” snapped Leatia. “And I don’t wanna hear a *human* get all high and mighty about *us* being messed up! You people did the same thing just a little while back, didn’t you? In the Colosseum, or whatever?”

The Colosseum, if memory served, was a massive, circular arena in Rome. Back in ancient times, slaves called gladiators would fight to the death for the entertainment of the masses there, and the masses ate it up. It was pure bloodsport, and when she put it that way, I had to admit that she had a point—the Spirit War’s system *was* sort of similar to that. The one tiny little problem, of course, was her assertion that ancient Rome was “just a little while back.” I had to wonder if Leatia was actually a *lot* older than she looked. It would make sense for humans and spirits to have different life spans, right? She *seemed* younger than me at a glance, of course, so if it was a question of life spans, they’d have to be *wildly* different.

“Bwa ha ha!” cackled Hajime. “You’ve got a point there! Humans are just as messed up as you people, no question about it!” His grin was as cynical as ever, with a ferocious edge to it as well. If he felt any sort of shame or any sense of inferiority from being made a show of, he certainly didn’t make it easy to tell. If anything, he seemed *proud* to be the spirits’ spectacle.

“And Players put up with being put on show, fighting each other to the death in spite of it all, just because of the reward at the end?” I asked.

“That’s right,” said Hajime. “They do it to be one of the *Final Eight* and to get their wishes granted.”

I gulped. As the Spirit War dragged on, the number of remaining Players would inevitably shrink. When that number reached eight Players in total, then those eight would be granted a reward: the right to make one wish, *any* wish, come true. All it took was surviving an all-out battle royale with close to a thousand superpowered participants. The eight who did—the *Final Eight*—would receive the blessing of the spirits.

“Course, there’s no telling what’ll *really* happen when the field narrows to eight Players until you get there yourself. Do they have one final tournament to decide who’s really the strongest after their wishes get granted, or does the War just end then and there? Solving that mystery’s part of the fun—right, Leatia?” asked Hajime.

“Right,” confirmed Leatia. “My lips are sealed on that one. If you wanna find out what happens then, you’ll just have to survive till the end.” In other words,

the Players wouldn't even know what it was that awaited them at the War's end until they got there. Finding out was supposed to be part of their motivation.

"So...are you fighting because you have a wish you want granted? Or are you fighting because you want to see what happens when the War ends for yourself?" I asked without really thinking about what I was saying.

A second later, though, I realized how pointless of a question it was. Just as I presumed he would, Hajime shrugged and gave me the most flippant response possible. "What, you think I'd just tell you that?"

"Yeah, figures," I sighed. It wasn't hard to predict. I knew him well enough to see it coming a mile away.

Hajime had always been willing to talk your ear off about the most pointless stuff, but the second you asked him about something that was actually *important*, he wouldn't even give you the time of day. That was doubly true when it came to his private life and personal thoughts—the walls he put up around them were incredibly high. I'd spent three years with Hajime back in high school, and even after all that time, he hadn't shown me so much as a peek into his inner world. It made me feel a little like he was pushing me away, honestly—but on the other hand, the more he shut me out, the more I wanted to find some way to get a glimpse into his mind.

"Anyway," said Hajime, standing up from his bed and throwing his arms wide open, "over the course of this past year, I have labored under my formerly lost true name, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, with the power of *Lucifer's Strike* at my side, to bring the ironclad hammer of judgment down upon those feckless sinners who know not the consequences of intruding upon my domain!"

Hajime looked like he was off in another world entirely as he recited a spiel that was both laden with excessively long proper nouns and so absurdly full of twisted, nonsensical metaphors that, frankly, I had no idea what he was even talking about. In any case, it seemed he was set on doing his best and fighting to the end. *Okay, Hajime, I get the picture. You can stop now.*

"Yes—I am he who aspires to be called *Ancient Lucifer* by those who fear me!" he eventually concluded.

Oh, great, another proper noun... Wait, what? “Hold on—you...*aspire* to be called that? So people don’t *actually* say it? You just *want* them to?”

“Right. It’s a title I aspire to be given,” said Hajime without a trace of irony.

How? How can he bring himself to look so serious when he says stuff like that? My thought process had ground to a complete halt, but Hajime was still talking, each preposterous statement as earnest as the last.

“I was *hoping* that everyone would call me by my true name, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, but, well...I kept saying it over and over, but nobody was ever able to remember the whole thing.”

Well, yeah! Your true name’s way too long, that’s why! It took me *ages* to memorize it, myself.

“Every time I told someone my name, they’d be all, ‘Huh? What was that?’ and I’d have to say it again, and I just got sick of it. Like, what’s *wrong* with you people, huh? You all have a case of thickheaded protagonist syndrome, or what?” Hajime griped.

I hate to say it, but you really brought this one upon yourself! Can’t sympathize at all, honestly.

“And no matter how many battles I fought in, nobody *ever* came up with a title to give me themselves...”

Well, yeah, of course they didn’t. This isn’t a manga, Hajime! He was clearly seriously troubled by all this, but I just couldn’t bring myself to care.

Hajime let out a sigh, then crouched down before me. It felt like his gaze was piercing right through me as he looked me in the eye. “And that’s why I need allies, Hitomi,” he said.

“Wait...what?” I asked. “And that’s why” would usually imply some sort of logical lead-in to the idea, but if he’d provided one, I definitely hadn’t picked up on it.

“I need someone—someone who can stand off to the side as I battle and say things like ‘I’d expect nothing less from the man they call *Ancient Lucifer!*’ Someone to be shocked by my exploits!”

“And you want *me* to do that?!”

The fact that he’d chosen to share all this behind-the-scenes info with me had already led me to assume he was going to ask me to do *something* for him...but I never, *ever* would have imagined that that something was working to spread the title he’d thought up throughout the Playerbase for him. He really did have a way of always exceeding my expectations in the weirdest way possible.

“Bwa ha ha! Well, that’s the *most* important reason why I want you on my side, but it’s not the *only* one,” he explained, which was nice and all, except for the “most important reason” part. *That* was obnoxious. “I’ve just gotten sick of running single-player, that’s all,” Hajime continued, his tone so weighty and serious you’d think he was proposing to me. “Be one of my wings, Hitomi.”

To make a long story short, I accepted Hajime’s pseudo-proposal without a second thought. They say love makes you dumb, and frankly, they’re right. I’ve *never* been capable of refusing to do whatever Hajime asks me to. All that being said, in the case of this particular favor, I’m not about to blame him for it. Even if he hadn’t asked me to help him, I was fully prepared to offer to help myself. I was ready to offer to fight by his side.

I don’t think I really appreciated how dangerous and horrific the world he was living in really was at that point in time. Still, though, I knew that I wanted to be by his side. Kiryuu was like the mist, so ephemeral you could never touch him no matter how close to him you got, and I wanted to do whatever I could to at least lay a finger on him.

The days flashed by like you wouldn’t believe after I became a Player. Before I knew it, six months had come and gone. The power I’d awakened to, *Eternal Wink* (do I even need to say that Hajime named it?), ended up being very obviously unsuitable for combat, so I wound up becoming Hajime’s dedicated supporter. Or, at least, that’s what we called me, anyway—Hajime pretty much always went out into battle alone, so for a supporter, I was doing an awfully small amount of actual supporting. When all was said and done, I mostly, erm...did my best to spread his title around, honestly.

I seriously almost keeled over dead from the sheer shame of it the first time I said “I’d expect nothing less from the man they call *Ancient Lucifer*” out loud. The person Hajime was fighting at the time gave me this look of *complete* befuddlement. It was a “What the hell is that lunatic talking about?” look if I’d ever seen one. But, of course, Hajime would compliment me if I said it right...so, yeah, I ended up going pretty all-in on the whole thing. Thanks to that, I’d grown used to saying his title enough that I didn’t even feel embarrassed anymore...which was horrifying in its own right.

That wasn’t the only thing that had changed, though. As we fought and fought, our little group gained a few more members. Some of them approached us, and Hajime went out of his way to recruit others. And so, our team was formed: the twelve wings of deepest darkness, *Fallen Black*. Again, it goes without saying that Hajime was responsible for its name—it was just *dripping* with his whole aesthetic. As for why it was “the *twelve* wings” when there weren’t even twelve of us, well, that’s best explained in Hajime’s own words:

“Lucifer, lord of the fallen angels, was once one of the greatest and mightiest of the Seraphim. He served as their leader, and such was the extent of his power that God granted him *twelve* wings, while the rest of His heavenly host made do with but six. And yet, for all his power, when he raised the flag of rebellion against God, he was cast out of the heavenly realm. Truly, his tale of conquest is a tragic one...”

...apparently. I hadn’t asked, by the way, but that didn’t stop Hajime from enthusiastically explaining it to me, and somehow the story had stuck in my mind. In any case, I, Saitou Hitomi, was the First Wing of *Fallen Black*. I’d thought that it made way more sense for *Hajime* to be the First Wing, since he was the one who’d made the team up in the first place and all, but when I asked about it, he just said, “I’m the Zeroth Wing, obviously,” and that was that.

Right. Yeah. Don’t know how I forgot. Hajime’s always loved the number zero. He *loved* plot twists about organizations having a secret zeroth member, or there being a hidden team number zero, or whatever. And actually, it might not’ve made sense to count him as one of his own wings in the first place.

If Hajime was the organization’s head, then we were its limbs. If he was the tree, we were the branches. And if he was a fallen angel...then we were his

wings. That was how we, *Fallen Black*, were meant to be.

Chapter 4: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Second of the Twenty-First Year

Q: What gets filthier and filthier the more you use it?

A: The heart of man.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

“Hitomi. Hey, Hitomi!”

“Wha?! Huh?! Wh-What?”

“C’mon, eye on the prize, Hitomi! Are you even listening?”

“I, uhh...sorry.”

“Keep it together, sheesh! Were you having a flashback, or what?” snapped Hajime from the rather extravagant sofa he was seated on. His gaze bored into me from behind his slightly askew tiny round sunglasses.

I tried to pull myself out from my recollections and back into the present moment, and I looked around at my surroundings. We were in an old, run-down building just a little ways away from the local station and its surrounding shopping district—specifically, in a stylishly decorated dart bar located between the fourth and fifth floors. Yes, *between* the floors: the bar was occupying a space that had been brought into being by Akutagawa’s supernatural power. This was Fallen Black’s secret hideaway, and anyone who wasn’t a member of our team couldn’t enter.

Our whole team was assembled in the bar that day.

The First Wing: *Eternal Wink*—Saitou Hitomi.

The Second Wing: *Dead Space*—Akutagawa Yanagi.

The Third Wing: *Head Hunting*—Natsu Aki.

The Fourth Wing: *Zigzag Jigsaw*—Toki Shuugo.

The Fifth Wing: *Sex Eclipse*—Yusano Fantasia.

The Zeroth Wing: *Lucifer's Strike*—Kiryuu Hajime.

That was *Fallen Black's* current roster—a total of six members.

“C’mon, Ryuu, you don’t have to *shout* at her! Tomi’s gotta be exhausted, right? She drove all the way out just to pick you up last night and all,” Aki grumbled from her seat over at the counter before draining her drink in a single gulp. “Ahhh, now *that’s* the stuff! Hey, Fanfan, gimme another orange juice!” she shouted, then slid the glass across the countertop. It glided across the bar’s slick surface, and, in the absence of anyone to stop it, continued to glide until it slammed right into the small mountain of empty glasses that had been accumulating in the corner. A thunderous crash rang out as the glasses toppled like bowling pins, smashing to pieces on the ground below.

“*Aaaagh!*” shrieked Aki. “*Fanfan!* What’re you *doing?*! You’re supposed to *catch* the glass when people do that!”

“I-I caaan’t! There’s no way I could react that fast! You have to warn me sooner!” wailed Fan, who was standing on the other side of the counter with a bottle of soda in each hand. “I-I-I didn’t have a free hand to catch it with! And besides, why did you even have to slide it like that?! Just *ask* next time, *please!*”

“You just don’t get it, girl! You *gotta* slide your glass when you’re at a bar! Gotta get that *fwoosh*, y’know?!”

“You’re acting like a child!”

“Oh, no you *didn’t!* I am *not* letting a middle schooler call me a child!”

The two girls, one dressed in a school uniform and the other in a pink nurse’s outfit, quickly descended into a screaming match. At the ripe old age of twenty-two, all I could think as I watched the teens fight it out was, *Ahh, to be young again.*

Natsu Aki was a student at Sakuragawa Girls’ Academy, a school that was somewhat famous in the area for being full of well-to-do young ladies, one of

whom was Aki. She kept her hair tied up in braids and wore black-rimmed glasses that made her *look* as trim and tidy as could be, but her fashion sense was just a front she put on to fit in at school. In truth, her personality was closer to a rowdy, fun-loving wild child than the calm and innocent vibe her look put out.

Yusano Fantasia, meanwhile—or Fan, as I called her—went to an ordinary public middle school. She was a kind and pleasant girl, but it sort of felt like she wasn't always all there, in a sense. I guess you could say she was just sort of *off* sometimes. For instance, she constantly wore her eye-catchingly bright pink nurse's outfit because "pink is cute," as she'd put it. I guess you could say her fashion sense sort of symbolized her slightly out-there nature.

"Quit *screeching*, for god's sake! This ain't a goddamn kindergarten!" a harsh voice snapped from the other side of the bar. I looked over to find that Toki was sweeping up the fragments of glass that had scattered across the floor. "If you're gonna break shit, then clean it up *before* you start arguing about whose fault it is! I swear to god," he grumbled, his brow furrowed with frustration. For all his complaining, though, his cleanup was proceeding at a rapid and remarkably efficient pace. The whole mess was out of the picture in no time at all.

Toki Shuugo could always be found dressed in his trademark tank top and old, distressed jeans. His ever-bare shoulders were covered with elaborate, intimidating, flame-shaped tattoos, and his whole look just screamed "wild, violent street punk." His constant glare and foul mouth didn't do that impression any favors either, but for all the things that made him intimidating, all it took was a single conversation to realize that he was actually a perfectly nice boy when all was said and done. It wasn't a fluke that he'd gone to clean up the shattered glass before anyone else. Behind his rough appearance lurked a remarkably conscientious personality.

"And you can't keep spacing out like this, Hitomi!" Toki snapped, rounding onto me next. "You're the only damn member of this whole crew that actually *listens* when people talk! The girls just shout all the time, Kiryuu spouts gibberish, and Akutagawa—"

Fwsh! Halfway through his sentence, Toki pulled a jackknife out of his pocket

and threw it with an obviously practiced hand. What little shonen manga I'd read had been due to Hajime's influence, and the only association I'd had with the word "jackknife" was *Prince of Tennis*, but after meeting Toki, I'd learned that the term originally referred to a type of large folding pocket knife. The blade of Toki's jackknife, however, was so horribly worn and jagged that it could barely move at all anymore. Its blade was a zigzag, practically serrated, worn down to the point that it looked like it might fall to pieces. It was a misshapen jackknife that would never fold again.

"...might as well be *mute* for how little the damn kid talks," Toki concluded as his knife thudded into a dartboard's bull's-eye. The darts that were already embedded in the board were shaken loose by the impact and clattered to the floor.

Akutagawa, who'd been playing darts alone off in the corner and had been remaining totally disengaged from the conversation, froze in place, a dart still raised and at the ready. "Who are you calling mute?" he mumbled in a dull and gloomy voice as he turned to face us. He kept a pair of headphones constantly covering his ears, but it seemed they didn't muffle the world around him enough to block out our voices.

"Communication is overrated," said Akutagawa. "As long as you can get the bare minimum you need to stay alive, what does it matter if you don't communicate? Why bother giving people you can't stand the time of day? If being able to communicate well means reading the room and laughing along with the morons around you, then I'd rather be mute."

"Huh? Whazzat? I can't hear you, speak up! And look me in the eye when you talk to me, dammit!" said Toki.

"Ugh... What a drag," Akutagawa practically whispered as he hung his head. Then he walked over to the dart board, pulled Toki's knife out, and tossed it back to him with an underhanded throw. Passing a *knife* like that to someone was beyond dangerous, but Toki caught it like it was nothing between two of his fingers. "Talking with a punk like you would be a waste of my time," Akutagawa grumbled as he returned to his game of darts. He said it just barely loud enough for us to hear it, but his scorn still came through quite clearly.

Akutagawa Yanagi was, well...a bit of a problem child, I guess. He never took those headphones off, and he always had his phone or an iPad on hand to play games on. Personalitywise, he was the quintessential mouthy little brat. If you told him that it's rude to wear headphones while someone's talking to you, he'd say that he had the volume down low and could hear you perfectly well, so it was fine. If you told him that you were talking about something important and he should spit out his gum and listen, he'd tell you that it had been *scientifically proven* that chewing gum helps boost your ability to concentrate. He was cheeky, impertinent, and had an uncanny way of making you want to just *deck* him the longer you spent talking with him.

"Akutagawa," growled Toki, "if you've got a problem with me, then say it to my face! I can't *stand* that sorta backbiting bullshit!"

"Whatever," grunted Akutagawa.

"I keep *telling* you, Fanfan, that nurse's outfit is *wack*!"

"Wh-What I wear is my business, isn't it?!"

On one side of the bar we had Toki and Akutagawa, and on the other, Aki and Fan. The men and the ladies of *Fallen Black* alike were engaged in a pair of slowly escalating arguments, and the bar was getting rowdier and rowdier. And then, just as it felt like the situation was about to spiral out of control...

"Oh, shut *up*, people."

...a low, heavy voice rang out, resonating with incredible gravity, like it'd echoed up from the pits of Hell itself.

"Silence your bleating, you accursed little lambs. Having small fries like *you* kicking up a fuss around me is liable to make *me* look as petty as you are, you know?" said Hajime as he looked over the rest of us, his mouth twisting into a ghastly smirk. One eye blazed crimson while the other was a solid jet black, but both held a captivating twinkle of authority that left us all rooted in place. "You don't wanna get written out of this story thanks to one of my whims, do you? Then do yourselves a favor and *shut the hell up*."

His words, blunt and ruthless, washed over everyone present. He hadn't raised his voice, but still, his tone shook us all to the core. One warning from their boss was all it took for everyone to cease their squabbling and freeze in place...or rather, you'd *think* that's all it would've taken.

"Excuse me? Who died and made *you* king, Ryuu?"

"If you want to act like you're all high and mighty, please give back the thousand yen you borrowed from me first!"

"You got no one to blame for this 'cept yourself, anyway. We don't listen to you 'cause you always go on and on about stupid shit that makes no sense."

"How did an *idiot* like him end up as our boss, anyway...?"

But no, every one of them responded with immediate, unconcealed grumbles of dissatisfaction. *Hajime, you've completely lost face with your crew! You went all out on threatening to murder them if they didn't shut up, and they're totally ignoring you! Your dignity as our boss is in shambles!*

Hajime just sat there, silent, that dauntless grin still plastered across his face. Actually, it looked like it was *frozen* on his face. As best as I could tell, he hadn't anticipated that nobody would get freaked out by his attempt at intimidation and was frantically reassessing the situation on the spot.

I couldn't stand to watch him like that any longer, so I jumped in to defuse the situation. "C-Come on, everyone, let's not turn this into a big fight or anything! It was all my fault for not paying attention in the first place, right?! Sorry, guys!" I desperately apologized.

Toki turned to look at me. "This ain't something *you* have to be sorry for, Hitomi," he grunted.

"Right!" shouted Aki. "You didn't do anything wrong, Tomi!"

"I-I'm sorry too! I shouldn't have been so loud," Fan meekly apologized.

Even our resident brat himself, Akutagawa, got in on the action and muttered "Sorry" with a very cursory nod.

How am I this popular with the team?! When I was the one asking, everyone shifted into obedient mode at the drop of a hat. It seemed that I, the First Wing

of Fallen Black, had become its most universally respected member without even realizing it. I *was* in charge of all the busywork like getting in touch with people and managing everybody's schedules, so I suppose it made a certain amount of sense that they'd have a degree of faith in me.

Hajime struck the perfect balance between selfishness and incomprehensibility to make himself the worst possible candidate to head up an organization like ours. He'd done basically nothing to live up to the responsibilities you'd think the boss would hold, following his whims while I gradually fell into the position of his number two, or his advisor, or whatever. I'd had a lot of chances to develop a dialogue with everyone on the team as a result, but up until that moment, I hadn't realized how overwhelming their approval of me was when compared to our actual leader.

"U-Umm, okay, so...why don't you start from the top, Hajime? What were you trying to tell us all?" I asked.

"Huh? I mean...nah, whatever," said Hajime. "Not like anyone's going to listen to *me*, regardless..."

And now he's sulking. Gah, why does this man have to be such a pain sometimes?! "That's not true at all!" I insisted. "I *love* listening to you talk, Hajime! In fact, you're the *only* person I'd bother listening to if I could get away with it! Everything you say is always so interesting, and so cool to boot!"

"Heh... Bwa ha ha!" laughed Hajime, suddenly wearing a triumphant smirk. Buttering him up had always been incredibly easy—you basically just had to call him cool, and the rest would sort itself out. "Then listen carefully, Hitomi!" said Hajime, who then turned to face the rest of our members. "You people better listen up too—this is gonna be plot relevant."

Looks like we're finally moving this meeting along, then.

"Leatia got in touch with me earlier," said Hajime. "Seems they've finally tracked down *F*'s secret base."

F was an organization that was largely made up of Rogue Players. They didn't call themselves *F*, as far as I knew—the War Management Committee had come up with the name as a matter of convenience. I guess the idea was that since Rogue Players operated *free* from the Committee's influence, the letter *F* was as

appropriate of a name for them as any.

Under normal circumstances, each Player had a Spirit Handler who managed their participation in the war. Hajime and I were both managed by Leatia, for instance, and all of the other members of *Fallen Black* had their own spirit handlers as well. Generally, the Committee tried to keep each spirit assigned to three or four people.

If I were to try to describe the whole system with a simple metaphor, I'd say that Players were like manga creators, Spirit Handlers were like their editors, and the War Management Committee was like the publishing company the editors worked for...or something to that effect. Just like manga creators have contracts with the publishing houses that print their work, we Players were monitored by the Committee and registered with them as active participants in the War.

All that being said, a strangely large number of Players had been cropping up recently who *weren't* registered with the Committee. Those were the Rogue Players, and if everything had been working as intended, they wouldn't have existed in the first place.

"Course, they *have* cropped up every once in a while in previous wars, apparently," said Hajime. "When the spirits get sloppy, Rogues start showing up here and there."

"But the number of them we've been dealing with lately feels like a little more than just 'here and there,'" I noted.

"Riiight?" Aki listlessly drawled. "Remember those dudes Toks and Fanfan whacked the other day? Turned out they were Rogues. And the one you took out yesterday was one too, right, Ryuu?"

Aki, incidentally, had a personal policy of always calling people by nicknames. She also made a habit of never speaking in a polite tone to anyone, no matter who they were. It didn't *bother* me, or anything, but I'd always been one of those serious-to-a-fault sort of girls who just couldn't pull an attitude like that off, so I was maybe a little jealous of how effortlessly uninhibited she could be.

"According to Leatia, it's painfully obvious that there's a spirit wrapped up in this whole mess somehow," said Hajime. "*Some* spirits don't like how the War

Management Committee handles things—hell, they don't like how the whole War's set up in general. Those spirits are putting together some sorta evil master plan to carry out here in the human world...or at least, that's what the Committee thinks, anyway."

I guess that means the spirits aren't a totally united front, then. It hadn't really occurred to me that them all being fellow spirits didn't necessarily mean they'd all get along, but in retrospect, it was pretty obvious. Humans and spirits both had the capacity for individuality, and that meant that if you got a group of either of them together, there was just no way that group would end up monolithic in its opinions. We were the perfect example, actually—*Fallen Black* was an absolute mess of an organization that constantly felt like it was falling apart at the seams.

"So? What're these *F* people after?" asked Toki with a slight grin. "The Committee said it was an *evil* master plan, but that's just evil as far as they see it, right? Like, what if *F* was out to stop the whole damn War? I'd say that'd make 'em more humane than the Committee folks, eh?"

I felt myself twitch with surprise. The whole premise of the Spirit War was to give humans supernatural powers and make them fight to the death. If *F* was out to stop that—if they thought that using humans as participants in a sick game show for spirits to gamble on was unacceptable—then wouldn't that make *them* the good ones? Wouldn't that mean they were out to protect us humans?

While I was shaken by my newfound perspective on *F*, though, Hajime simply sneered. "Bwa ha ha! Come on, Toki, if you're gonna tell a joke, you should at least try to make it funny! This War's the best toy I could ever ask for, and if those little shits think they can take it away from me, they might as well already be dead!" he declared. His smile expressed a silent but almost joyous will to take on anyone who dared to challenge him.

Nobody could ever say something like that unless they were truly enjoying these battles of ours from the bottom of their heart.

"Of course," Hajime continued, "This is all just guesswork. Nobody really knows for sure what *F*'s after. According to Leatia, the details are 'still under

investigation' and we should 'sit tight and not cause trouble' for now."

"Marilino said pretty much the same thing," said Toki.

"So did Shedrim," added Fan. Those were the names of their respective Spirit Handlers, by the way.

"What's our plan, Kiryuu?" asked Akutagawa in a dull, gloomy tone. He'd been silent up until then, and it sort of felt like he was telling us to hurry up and get to the point already. Akutagawa, it seemed, wasn't a fan of meandering meetings. *Kids these days just don't know how to be patient.*

Hajime closed his eyes and spent a few seconds in thought. "Supernatural battle playbook, rule three: never assume your foe will be nice enough to explain how their power works to you," he finally said. "So, yeah—how about we go on a little journey and scout out the enemy?"

Ugh, I knew it. Leatia clearly didn't understand what made Hajime tick. If you told him to sit tight and not cause trouble, there was a one hundred percent chance that he would go out and raise hell. Nothing pleased Hajime more than rebelling against something, and what that something was didn't really seem to matter much to him. He was a chuuni man-child who went out of his way to avoid growing up—of *course* he wouldn't just "sit tight." The other members seemed as unsurprised by his declaration as I was, by the way. We all knew that our boss was prone to pulling this sort of stunt.

"Let's get out there and see what there is to see! We'll determine if those fools are worthy enough for me, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, to pass judgment upon them!" Hajime said as he stood up and turned with *just* the right sort of snap to send his coat flapping through the air. He insisted on making his coat do that every single time he took any sort of action, and it always kicked up a cloud of dust in the room, so I really wished he'd cut it out—not that I'd have ever said that out loud.

"Now then—if we're scouting out the enemy, that means it's *your* time to shine," Hajime continued, turning toward one of our members in particular: *Head Hunting*, aka Natsu Aki.

"Hah!" Aki laughed. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement behind her black-rimmed glasses as she twisted her braids around her fingers. "Yeah,

figured you'd say that. This is where I can really show my stuff...though it's also the *only* time I get to do jack squat."

Aki's power, *Head Hunting*, was incredibly specialized. It was, put simply, the power to analyze other people's powers.

"All right," said Aki, "I'm in! Time to get out there and earn my keep!"

Our scouting team ended up comprising Hajime, Aki, and me, making three members in total. I was in the driver's seat, literally—we were heading for the enemy's base using my car for transport.

Hajime and I were the only members of *Fallen Black* who weren't in our teens, and I was the only one who owned a car. Toki used to be the second-in-command of an old-fashioned motorcycle gang called Cruise and had one of those huge, ridiculous motorcycles that he rode around all the time, but according to him, he had a personal policy against letting women ride on the thing, and he didn't let guys ride double with him because he didn't want to get that up close and personal with a dude. In short, he wouldn't let *anyone* ride it at all. The guy had some pretty obnoxious personal policies, honestly.

Hajime, meanwhile, didn't even have a driver's license. His primary means of transport was an old, rickety, single-gear bicycle that he referred to as "the Plaintive Dame Dolor." With the only other members who were old enough to drive out of the picture, I was left to essentially serve as *Fallen Black*'s dedicated chauffeur. As a side note, people with only one functional eye *are* allowed to get driver's licenses in Japan. As long as your remaining one has good enough eyesight to pass the vision tests, they won't give you a hard time about it.

"Agh!" Aki gagged, then succumbed to a coughing fit. "Ryuu! Come on, don't smoke in the car! You're stinking the whole place up! This thing's tiny enough as it is!" she yelled. She was in the back seat, while Hajime was right in front of her, puffing on a cigarette he'd just lit up.

"Yeah? Well, tell it to Hitomi. She's the one who decided to buy a clown car," said Hajime.

Well, I happen to like this car, you jerks! Do you have any idea how long I wanted my own car for? I took out a loan for it and everything!

“This thing *is* way too small, yeah,” said Aki, doubling down on ridiculing my innocent vehicle. “Hey, Tomi, want one of our cars? The garage back home’s full of ’em.”

“N-No thanks, I’m good,” I quickly replied. Aki’s family was stupendously wealthy, and she definitely had a bit of that rich-girl attitude when it came to problem-solving sometimes. From a common sense perspective, of course, you couldn’t just *give* someone a car for free.

“But anyway, why’re you still smoking at all, Ryuu?” Aki continued. “Smoking’s not even in fashion in this day and age!”

“Hah!” scoffed Hajime. “I wouldn’t expect a child like you to understand the toxic charms of these bad boys,” he said, waving his cigarette in the air.

“No, I don’t! And ‘toxic charms,’ dude? Seriously?” Aki countered, then sighed. “You are *such* a waste of a pretty face, I swear. And the way you just *have* to flick out that stupid Zippo every time you light up’s *such* a turnoff. You think so too, right, Tomi?”

“R-Right,” I said after a moment’s pause. Did I secretly think that Hajime looked really cool when he was smoking? Yes. Did I think the way he flicked his Zippo open whenever he pulled it out was incredibly sexy? Yes. Could I bring myself to admit any of that to Aki? Not on your *life*.

“Hmph!” Hajime sullenly snorted, then tapped the ash from his cigarette into my car’s ashtray. I didn’t smoke, so said ashtray was pretty much exclusively reserved for Hajime’s use. As was the passenger’s seat, for that matter, much as I wished *he* could be the one driving *me* around instead.

“Anyway, how much longer ’til we’re there, Tomi?” asked Aki. “What was the place called again? The Yuzuhara food processing plant?”

“Right, and we’re almost there. About five more minutes,” I said as I flicked on my turn signal and slowed way down, taking extra care to check for oncoming traffic before I took a left turn at a four-way intersection. The plant in question was located on the outskirts of town, and it was where *F* had supposedly decided to set up shop. Ostensibly, the plant produced a variety of food products that were sent out to the local convenience stores and supermarkets. “Hey, Hajime?” I said a moment later. “We’re *just* scouting out

the place this time, right?”

“Right. I already said that, didn’t I?” Hajime grunted.

“So, this isn’t going to get messy or anything, right?” I asked—or maybe “begged” would be the right word, in this case.

“Bwa ha ha!” Hajime cackled. “*That* depends on what sorta attitude they decide to take with us. If *F*’s full of dipshits who think they can get away with ruining my mood, I’ll send them straight to the Heavens’—”

“Ah, look! I see it, right over there!” shouted Aki as she leaned forward, sticking her head between the front seats and pointing ahead of us. Hajime, whose catchphrase she’d interrupted, just scowled. *These things happen, Hajime—don’t let it get to you.*

A little ways down the road, in the direction Aki was pointing, loomed the large factory we’d come all this way to check out.

The Yuzuhara food processing plant looked surprisingly well maintained, at least from the outside. It was a several-story building with clean white walls and a long, slender smokestack that looked like it was made to pierce right through the clouds. A variety of trucks, forklifts, and heavy machinery were parked around the facility, as well.

The idea was that we’d start our scouting mission out by taking a nice, long look around the facility’s exterior from a safe distance, but it wasn’t long before Hajime got bored and decided that we should make our way into the complex instead. Before I knew it, I found myself driving my car toward what looked like a gateway that led into the plant grounds.

“H-Hey, Hajime? Is this really a good idea?!” I asked.

“Is what a good idea?” Hajime asked back.

“This is the enemy’s base, isn’t it? Is it really a good idea to just march right in through the front door?”

“Hmm.” Hajime paused for a moment. “Meh, we’ll make it work. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?”

Could he even get any more careless? As I passed through the gateway and slowly drove deeper into the complex, I soon noticed somebody up ahead of us. Two somebodies, in fact—men dressed like security guards and standing in the road, blocking our way. I slammed on the brakes, bringing us to a sudden stop, and gulped. There we were, in the hideout of a mysterious organization with unclear motives, about to make first contact with their members on their turf for the first time!

“Natsu,” Hajime prompted, lowering his voice to a near whisper. I glanced over to find him smiling calmly. He seemed totally relaxed, which put him in stark contrast to me and my rapidly fraying nerves.

Aki leaned into the front of the car again and took a look at the men in front of us, squinting slightly as she activated her power. “Nope,” she said a moment later. “Those two’re ordinary humans. Neither of them are Players.” Her power, *Head Hunting*, told her what other people’s powers did at a glance, which naturally also meant that it let her know whether or not they had powers at all.

“So then they’re ordinary civilians who have no idea what’s going on here?” I wondered out loud. “Ah, or maybe *F* has non-Players working for them as well?”

“Don’t know, don’t care. If they’re not Players, then we can deal with them easily enough. Right, Hitomi?” said Hajime, shooting me a glance. I nodded, then I slowly drove my car up and stopped in front of the guards.

“Hey, sorry,” said one of the men as I rolled my window down. “This place is off-limits. Gonna have to ask you to leave now.”

The man’s tone was pretty casual for a guard, and now that I could get a closer look at the two of them, I noticed that neither man looked like the professional sort. Their brightly colored hair and slack, poorly fitting uniforms only reinforced that impression. They looked like they were probably around my age, and it was easy to infer that they were a couple college kids who’d taken on part-time jobs to earn some quick and easy pocket money.

“Sorry about this,” I said, putting on the best ingratiating smile I could manage. “I was trying to find a good spot to make a U-turn, and I sort of just ended up driving all the way in... So, umm, what sort of factory is this?” I

casually added.

“Yeah, uhh...sorry,” said the guard. “We’re just part-timers here, so no clue, honestly.”

Thought so. It seemed my first impression of them had been spot on.

“Bwa ha ha! Then quit wasting our time and clear the road, you nameless grunts! Better run while you can—this place is about to turn into a battlefield,” said Hajime in the most condescending tone he could possibly muster as he stepped out of the car. The guards looked stunned, and for a moment they just stood there, totally stiff. The complete confidence with which Hajime had delivered a line like *that* coupled with his eccentric outfit seemed to have left them thoroughly befuddled.

“*What?*” one of the guards finally spat. “Wh-Who’re *you?*”

“Dude, look at his eye—it’s *red*,” said the other. Their expressions quickly shifted to suspicion, with a distinct trace of fear mixed in.

Hajime, however, kept up his usual grin. “A dry wind blows today. On days like these...this right eye of mine starts to *ache*,” he said, spreading his fingers like he was demonstrating the left hand rule and covering half of his face in some sort of hilariously edgy pose. I’m sure he *thought* that line made him sound cool, but when I really thought about what he’d actually *said*, it basically just made it sound like he had a bad case of dry eye. “Have you fools ever heard of the Evil Eye?” Hajime asked, still maintaining that same pose and totally ignoring the guards’ obvious astonishment.

I, of course, had heard more about evil eyes than I’d ever wanted to. Some sources described them as a type of magic that placed a curse on whoever the user glared at, and some described them and their effects in much more esoteric terms. Every corner of the world seemed to have its own evil eye legend, and there were as many names for the concept as there were conflicting descriptions of how they worked. Supposedly, they all traced back to European folklore, if you looked back far enough, and one theory proposed that the origin of the concept could be found in old-school European witchcraft.

So, yeah—Hajime’s right eye was an Evil Eye, granted to him by a powerful witch...or at least that’s the explanation he provided, anyway. He also claimed

that since it wasn't his, he had a hard time controlling it by nature, and also that he could only unleash a third of its true potential as a result. And yes, to be absolutely clear, none of this was even remotely true.

"No clue what I'm talking about, eh?" said Hajime. "In that case, you'd better savor every second of this. Savor this eye of calamity, and bear witness to the iridescent nightmare trapped within!"

At that point, Hajime shot me the quickest of glances, making eye contact through the windshield. That was his way of signaling me to activate my power. I raised my hand, covering up my right eye—the eye that couldn't see to begin with. Covering up that eye didn't impair my vision at all, and I didn't really *have* to do it either. I'd just somehow gotten in the habit of doing so whenever I used my power, for no particular reason.

"Now..." said Hajime. "Look into my eye!"

At that exact moment, I unleashed my power: *Eternal Wink*. And barely an instant later, the guards' eyes lost their focus. Blank looks came over their faces, and they just stood there, bolt upright, vacant, and motionless. My power had worked just as it was supposed to.

"All right, part-timers—better go earn those paychecks," said Hajime, giving the two of them a friendly pat on the shoulders.

"Okay," the guards droned, nodding listlessly. They looked completely dead to the world.

"Let's go," said Hajime as he climbed back into the passenger's seat. I drove right past the guards, and this time they didn't even try to stop me. About a minute from now, they'd forget everything that had just happened and go back to manning their posts, completely unaware that we'd ever been there.

"The power of the Evil Eye is mighty indeed," said Hajime. "Yes, mighty enough to give even I, its wielder, chills."

"Yeah, uhh, that's not *your* power, Ryuu. It's Tomi's, remember?" jabbed Aki, cutting through Hajime's self-congratulatory monologue with ease.

She was right, of course. My power was responsible for manipulating the guards and for their memory loss, even if Kiryuu's eye had done the deed.

Eternal Wink was what had enabled him to do so: it let me grant others the power of the Evil Eye. I could give it to anyone within my own line of sight. As for why we called it “giving people an Evil Eye,” well, I had Hajime to thank for that—of *course* he was the one who’d come up with the terminology.

What could the Evil Eyes I gave people actually do? They were pretty versatile, really. They could show people elaborate illusions, put them to sleep for brief periods of time, and slightly tamper with their memories, among other things. Their effects were never that tremendously severe in scale, but they *were* pretty handy in a wide variety of circumstances. The power also had plenty of limitations, of course, but when up against a non-Player, basically none of them applied, making it almost impossible to beat. I couldn’t give *myself* an Evil Eye, incidentally—I could only give it to someone else within my field of vision, and that someone could only use it on anyone who made eye contact with them.

I have to admit: as far as powers went, mine was unnecessarily convoluted for sure. It was what I’d awakened to, though, so my only real choice was to accept it and make the best of the situation. “The malevolent eye that rules over the Evil Eyes: *Eternal Wink*” was what Hajime called it...or something along those lines, anyway. While I never quite figured out what distinguished a “malevolent eye” from an Evil Eye in his internal fantasy world, keeping track of how his delusions and the real world related to each other really wasn’t my responsibility. The point of all this is that I could use my own eye to grant Evil Eyes to other people, and that’s really all that mattered to me.

I drove deeper and deeper into the factory grounds, eventually arriving at a parking lot. There weren’t many ordinary cars like mine parked there, but there were quite a few trucks of varying sizes. “What next, Hajime? Should we stop here and go in on foot?” I asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” Hajime said, then stopped to stretch and let out a massive yawn. “On second thought, I’m getting bored. Let’s just go home.”

“*Now?! After we’ve come this far?! I shouted. I never would’ve dreamed that was what he’d propose, and I was caught completely unprepared. What is he even talking about?! I*

“I used my Evil Eye already, and I can only do that once a day. No real point digging any deeper now,” Hajime explained.

“That’s *not how it works!*” I wailed. “You just made that up! You can use my Evil Eye as many times as you want! It’s *my* power, I know all about its limitations!” *Ahh, dang it, what am I supposed to do now?! This is so completely out of left field! Why would Hajime’s mood have to swing toward boredom now?! I bet that all he really wanted was to do some posing and use my Evil Eye, and now that he’s done that, he’s satisfied and doesn’t care about the rest anymore!*

“This right eye of mine isn’t *mine* by *right*,” said Hajime. “There’s no telling when I could lose control over its powers. I can use it once a day, and if I break that limit—if I overextend—my world will be plunged into eternal darkness.”

“Then get plunging, already!” *Gaah, screw this, seriously! Why do chuunis have to be so obsessed with their powers coming with limitations and risks and stuff?! Why does that make it cooler for them?! They’re always all “I can only use it for this many minutes a day,” or “this many times a day,” or it only works on their right hand, or on one eye! Or using it drains their life force, or eats away at their existence, or plunges them into darkness!*

“Wait, like, for real? You wanna go home *now*? No way, right?” said Aki. “You brought me all the way out here, so shouldn’t I at least scope out their boss’s power or something?”

I couldn’t have agreed more. I hadn’t been all that enthusiastic about this scouting mission to begin with, but after having come all this way, I wanted to accomplish *something* before we left. I didn’t want this whole excursion to turn out to be a waste of time and energy!

“Whatever! Let’s just go,” said Hajime. “Oh, that’s right—I almost forgot I have a shift tonight. Gotta go home and get some shut-eye before I go to work.”

About half a year earlier, Hajime had found a job as a night shift clerk at a convenience store. Why had he gotten a job after spending so very long bumming it up? Simple: to pay back a debt he owed me. On the day I set foot into the world of supernatural battles—the day Hajime had shown up at my doorstep bloodied and battered from a battle with some unidentified foe—his

beloved coat and sunglasses had both been damaged beyond the point of repair. He'd needed to replace them, of course, and he'd ended up borrowing money from me in order to do so. And not just a little money either—both of them, it seemed, were way fancier than they looked and cost a ton.

“Wait, you're still working, Ryuu?” Aki asked disbelievingly. “Seriously, I gotta say: working at a convenience store? *Not* the right job for you at all.”

“I *completely* agree,” I said. “Saying he sticks out like a sore thumb at work would be an understatement.” I'd taken Aki and Fan along to make fun of—erm, to *visit* him at work once, and the striped shirt they had him wearing as a uniform suited him so poorly, it was kind of incredible.

“Yeah, I've been thinking it's about time I call it quits. I've paid back most of what I owe Hitomi anyway, and my manager keeps nagging me to dye my hair black,” said Hajime, adding “And that's after I told him that this silver hair's a sign of the sins I've committed and the punishment that was inflicted upon me...” under his breath a moment later in a truly grief-stricken tone of voice.

Once, long ago, Hajime had gone through some grand, heroic struggle that left him so traumatized, his hair had lost its color in a flash, leaving it the strikingly bright silver color it was today...according to him. In truth, of course, I helped him dye his hair on a regular basis. Getting your hair that shade requires you to totally bleach it first, and bleaching your hair to the point that it turns flat white takes a *lot* more effort than making it light brown or blonde. It's easy to screw up, and even if you do manage to pull it off, it leaves your hair scratchy and brittle. It was a long, painful process of trial and error, but recently, I'd finally figured out a technique to get him perfectly silver hair every time. *Chuunibyou's really more trouble than it's worth!*

“Wait!” I shouted, snapping back to reality. “This isn't the time to be sitting around and chatting! What're we gonna do? Are we *seriously* just turning around and going home?”

I couldn't keep idling in the parking lot forever, that was for sure. Speaking as the designated driver, I wanted to figure out if I was shutting my car off or turning around and leaving as soon as possible.

“Bwa ha ha! Do we keep scouting, or turn back here? We'll let fate decide—

it's time to flip a co—" Hajime began, but then stopped halfway through his sentence as his expression shifted ever so slightly. For just a moment, that flippant grin of his vanished and his eyes widened. And, in that same moment, Hajime reached out toward me. He moved like a master swordsman drawing his blade and striking down his foe in the same fluid motion, laying his hand on my thigh and pressing down hard. I could feel the warmth of his palm on the skin of my leg—he'd reached down just past the end of my skirt.

What.

N-No, seriously, what? Is...Is he groping me?! Here?! Now?! N-No way...why?! Has he been into thighs this whole time? Does Hajime have an absolute territory fetish?! N-No, stop it—ah, I mean, i-it's not that I'm not a little okay with this...gaaah, but not while Aki's watching!

In the span of a split second, an explosion of wild fantasies consumed my brain. Meanwhile, Hajime pushed down on my thigh. Pushing on someone's thigh, by extension, means moving the rest of their leg, and when you do that to someone who's sitting in the driver's seat with their foot on the gas, the results are pretty predictable. Pedal-to-the-metal predictable.

My car's engine roared as we rocketed forward. Aki and I shrieked as the inertia of that sudden and violent acceleration threw all of us back in our seats. She'd been leaning forward when Hajime hit the gas, and she hadn't been wearing a seat belt, so she ended up slamming rear-first into the back seat.

"Agh, ouch... What the *crap*, guys?!" Aki shouted.

"Y-Yeah, what was that for, Hajime?! A-And move your hand already!" I yelled in turn.

We didn't spend all that long chewing him out in the end though. A second later, we were interrupted by an incredibly loud, roaring *crash* from behind us. It was a dull, heavy noise, like something really big had just been smashed to pieces, or crushed, maybe. I reflexively glanced at the rearview mirror, and the sight that greeted me made my jaw drop: a semitruck was sticking up out of the ground. It looked like it had driven straight down from the sky and collided with the pavement front first—directly into the spot where I'd been idling my car just a second ago.

“I’m taking the wheel!” Hajime shouted. I was so distracted by the disaster behind us that I’d barely even noticed the hint of panic in his voice as he reached over, grabbing the steering wheel with his left hand and wrenching it to the right.

I finally managed to return my focus to our front, just in time to see the truck that was barreling directly toward us. Hajime had acted just in time, though, and the instant before it plowed into my car, we swerved abruptly to the right. Once again, the law of inertia sent me tumbling to the left, where I—of course—slammed right into Hajime. Specifically, I found my face buried in his chest.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaa?!”

“Stay still!” shouted Hajime.

“O-Okaaay,” I droned. His voice had a certain *something* to it when he got serious, and hearing that at point-blank range was a little more than I could take at the moment. The sheer shame of it all ended up occupying most of my attention, though I did spare just a little bit of thought to feel bad for Aki, who was shrieking her lungs out as she got tossed from one side of the back seat to the other.

“Back with us, Hitomi?” said Hajime. “The rest is up to you. Just keep driving, as fast as this thing’ll go!”

“Wha—huh?!”

Hajime lifted his hand from my thigh, let go of the wheel, and shifted back into his seat. I frantically grabbed the wheel in his stead and put my attention back on the road, right around the same time that Aki started raising hell behind us.

“Ow, ow, *ow*! That *hurt*, dammit! What the hell’s going on?!” she wailed.

“Bwa ha ha! Isn’t it obvious? We’re under attack!” said Hajime, grinning as he spun around to look over at the factory’s entrance. I spared a glance as well, and I saw a man standing there, one hand raised in our direction. His face had a certain refined look to it, and he was wearing a clean, well-kept suit. His hair was carefully arranged—definitely waxed—and he had a pair of glasses on that gave him an intellectual sort of look.

“We sure are right on the enemy’s doorstep,” said Hajime. “Slipped my mind for a minute there!”

I didn’t know what to say to that. He was right, obviously, but he was *also* the one who’d suggested we march right up to the enemy’s secret base *and* the one who’d let his guard down when we actually went through with it!

“This works out, though,” Hajime continued. “This factory was the right place after all—Leatia’s info was on the money. Most likely, that four-eyes over there’s a Rogue Player associated with *F*.”

“I-Is this really the moment for—*gah!*” I screamed, slamming on the brakes as another truck suddenly sped right in front of us across the path I’d been driving in. I knew we’d be sitting ducks if I stayed in one place, so I slammed the accelerator again a moment later, shooting us forward once more. “If he’s a Rogue Player, then we won’t be able to use my Evil Eye on him, right?”

“Right. I already used it once today, after all. It’s a one-a-day power, and if I break that taboo, I’d—”

“Not the time, Hajime!” I wasn’t even *close* to composed enough to play along with his chuuni crap right now.

The Evil Eyes I could give people had the power to exert a subtle degree of control over the minds of whoever made eye contact with their users. It was a useful power, for sure, but it had an awful lot of limitations to make up for that. The best way I could put it was that if whoever you tried to use it on was wary of you, it wouldn’t end up working properly on them. That’s all it took—the slightest distrust, and they’d block out your influence over them, just like that. There wasn’t a hard-and-fast rule that they couldn’t be used on other Players, but if the person in question saw the Evil Eye’s bearer as their enemy, it was basically hopeless.

My power was a fiddly one, no question about it. I’d found a number of ways to make use of it anyway, to be fair...but this was clearly not my time to shine. “A-Aki!” I shouted.

“No worries—I already got a look at him,” Aki replied.

All right! If Aki had managed to look at him, then the odds were sure to tip in

our favor. After all, that was all she needed to use *Head Hunting* and scope out his power.

“He’s a Player, all right,” said Aki. “His power’s—”

“Magnetism, right?” said Hajime, suddenly cutting her off and stealing her line. Aki and I gaped at him. “None of the trucks that’ve been driving at us have had anyone in them,” Hajime explained. “Mister Glasses over there’s been manipulating them, most likely. My first guess would’ve been that he had some sorta telekinesis, but his attacks have been too repetitive for that to make sense. If he were telekinetic, he’d be throwing all sorts of crap at us, not just trucks—those logs over there, chunks of concrete, you name it. Plus, the trucks’ve been kicking up plenty of dust, but the way that some of it’s moving isn’t natural. That’s iron sand in the air, for sure. All the iron sand on the ground’s getting picked up by the magnetic fields he’s making. A power like that could move trucks around no problem—it all checks out.”

“Y-Yeah, you got it,” said Aki. “His power lets him manipulate the force of magnetism—but that’s not all! He has another trick up his sleeve!” She sounded a little uneasy, like she was desperate not to let her one big chance to be useful get stolen away from her.

One of the biggest advantages to Aki’s power was that it let her perceive aspects of her opponent’s powers that they hadn’t even used yet. If they had a trick up their sleeve, or a trump card, or a special move, or a final form, she could render all that secrecy meaningless. Everything there was to know about their powers was hers to peruse—*that* was what made *Head Hunting* so remarkably useful.

“His trump card’s—”

“A rail gun, a coil gun, or a solenoid quench gun, right?” said Hajime, stealing her line once again.

Aki’s jaw dropped once more, and she flapped her lips silently for a couple seconds before managing to speak up again. “H-His trump card’s a coil gun...b-but, how did you *know*?”

“Bwa ha ha! People with electric or magnetic powers *always* have some sort of EML trick up their sleeves—that’s electromagnetic launcher, by the way. Rail

guns, which drive a projectile through the air by taking advantage of the left-hand rule to apply a Lorentz force to it. Coil guns, which use the linear motor principle to propel a projectile by way of magnetic repulsion. Solenoid quench guns, which use the corkscrew rule to launch projectiles using solenoid coils. There's plenty of other EML systems too—thermal guns are pretty well known, but those need a ton of electrical input, so you couldn't pull them off with just magnetism."

I was simultaneously impressed and exasperated beyond belief. When it came to supernatural battles and supernatural battles alone, Hajime displayed truly incredible powers of insight and reasoning, pulling from genuinely astonishing stores of obscure knowledge. He'd go on and on about the situation, the enemy, their weapons, their skills, all in the most intense jargon he could apply to them. For a lifelong chuuni who spent every day fantasizing and internally simulating the most out-there battles they could possibly come up with, that sort of theorizing was apparently a piece of cake. Magnetism, meanwhile, was as played out as a power could get. Hajime had almost certainly beaten foes with that sort of power hundreds of times before...in his imagination, anyway.

"Ugggh," groaned Aki. "Ryuu, you giant jerkwad! Thief! Cheater!" she wailed, kicking the back of his seat.

Hey, cut that out! This is my car!

"Quit flailing around, Natsu," said Hajime. "Just hurry up and do your job. You still haven't shown what your power's *truly* capable of!"

"Huh?"

"What's his power's name?"

"..."

Aki made the most conflicted expression I'd ever seen on her. Strictly speaking, *Head Hunting* let her learn about her opponent's powers by sorting through their memories. As such, if a Player decided to name their power for whatever reason, she'd be able to pick up on that as well. It was like a tiny piece of worthless info thrown in as a bonus alongside the actually valuable information her power gave her...but in Hajime's eyes, that useless scrap was the very essence of *Head Hunting's* capabilities.

“He hasn’t named it,” Aki finally said in a profoundly disinterested tone. “He and his allies just call it ‘magnetism.’”

We’d never actually encountered an enemy with a properly named power so far. Some of them had “names,” like “fire” or “water manipulation,” but those were really just flavorless descriptions, not proper *name*-names. Not one of our opponents so far had given their power a flashy name like the ones Hajime had given ours.

“Sheesh... Yet another fool of a foe who doesn’t understand the true meaning of a supernatural battle?” sighed Hajime, his voice laced with disappointment. “Surely there has to be one somewhere out there—a proud and honorable warrior who fights by the same creed that I do,” he mumbled, gazing out into the distance and apparently imagining this still-unknown warrior he’d yet to cross paths with. Personally, if he’d asked me whether or not someone like that was *really* out there waiting for him, I’d have responded with an unambiguous “Of *course* there friggin’ isn’t!”

“Huh? W-Wait a second,” I said. I’d been frantically dodging trucks the whole time we’d been carrying out our little strategy meeting (if you could even call it that—it seemed more like aimless chitchat to me), but suddenly, something weird happened. My car...stopped. I still had the accelerator pressed down as far as it would go, but I’d gradually slowed down until we were finally at a standstill.

Huh? What’s going on? I didn’t hit anything, and I haven’t let up on the gas! I hear the engine running, the tires are spinning...but we’re not moving! Why?

“Oh. I get it. Yeah, that’d do it,” said Hajime with a satisfied nod. “If he can move a truck, then of *course* he can move a minicar like this.”

I gasped. Suddenly, I knew exactly what was happening. It didn’t matter how much the tires spun—they’d never take us anywhere if they were spinning in the air, which they were, because the whole car was floating! He’d magnetically captured my car in the same way he’d been tossing the trucks around!

“O-Oh god, we’re floating! We’re floating, Hajime!” I yelled.

“The question is, will he smash us into the ground, or will he send another truck to grind us into paste while we’re stopped?”

“Why the *hell* are you so calm, Ryuu?! Stop *analyzing* this and *do* something!” shrieked Aki. “Aaagh, too high! *Way* too high!”

The interior of my car had descended into pure pandemonium, and a second later, I felt us jolt to the side. I knew in an instant that I was about to die, and I reflexively squeezed my eye shut, saying a brief, all-but-silent prayer.

“Bwa ha ha! Come on now, Hitomi! You’re my right hand, aren’t you? What’s the loyal wing of a fallen angel who rebelled against God doing praying to *Him* for salvation?”

To make a long story short, I did *not* die. Nothing happened at all, in fact. After around five seconds with my eye shut tight, something *did* finally jolt the car, but it was a gentle sort of jolt, not at all like the violent crash of a truck obliterating us. No, it was the sensation of my car touching back down, and when I opened my eyes, I found us once again on the ground, over in a corner of the parking lot. We’d been pretty much in its center when we’d lifted off, so we’d clearly traveled quite the distance.

“If you’ve got time to pray to God, use it to lavish *me* with praise instead,” said Hajime with an arrogant smirk. It only took me a moment to realize what had happened.

Oh, of course! Nothing says magnetism’s the only force that can act on my car—gravity can move it around just as well!

“I get it—you used your power, right? Nice one, Ryuu! You’re the man!” shouted Aki.

Lucifer’s Strike: the power to desecrate the force of gravity itself. Magnetism had lifted my car up, and gravity had pulled it right back down again.

“All right,” said Hajime. “We’ve gotten the car chase out of the way, so I think it’s time for some hand-to-hand combat.” He stepped out from my car, turning his gaze toward the entrance to the factory. There stood the man in glasses, looking back at Hajime with a dissatisfied frown.

“Hmm? Hey, now that I can get a good look at him, isn’t that guy actually pretty hot?” noted Aki. She wasn’t wrong—he *was* definitely on the handsome

side. The suit and the glasses worked well together and made him look like the sort of man who could hold down a steady job.

“Hah! We’ll see how hot he is after I’ve beaten his face into a bloody pulp!” barked Hajime before setting off across the parking lot, his trench coat flapping dramatically behind him.

Why would his coat do that when there wasn’t any wind to speak of? Because...*ugh*...Hajime was using his power to make it happen. He made a point of constantly applying just a little gravity to his coat in just the right way to make it trail stylishly through the air at all times. It was quite possibly the worst use of a god-tier power I could conceive of.

“A black coat and round sunglasses... I presume that would make you Kiryuu Hajime?” said the man with glasses as Hajime drew closer to him. He spoke in a calm, polite tone of voice. “I’ve heard rumors about you. They say people are calling you *Ancient Lucifer*.”

“Yeah, I guess they are,” said Hajime.

“I guess they are,” my rear! You were the one who made us do all that “stealth marketing” to spread it around, and you know it!

“So, tell me. What’s *F* getting up to in that factory?” asked Hajime, gesturing at the building behind the man.

The man pushed up his glasses with a finger and faintly smiled. “Do you really think I’m going to answer that?”

“Bwa ha ha! Fair enough—that makes this nice and easy. Let’s get this battle started, then!” said Hajime, his mouth curving into a bloodthirsty grin—the ghastly smile of a god of carnage. “Your face is gonna have ‘QUALITY’ written all over it when I’m done with you!”

The battle lasted about five minutes, all told. It was a forgone conclusion, really. Gravity and magnetism were simply on completely different levels of the supernatural power spectrum. Weighed against the ability to exert your will over anything and everything with mass, the ability to manipulate metal was petty and insignificant. Being able to accelerate your movements by making the ground repel your body magnetically would never let you keep up with

someone who could invert heaven and earth whenever he so chose. Even the man's so-called trump card, the coil gun, might as well have been a *squirt* gun in the face of an all-consuming black hole. The difference in their powers' capabilities was as overwhelming as Kiryuu Hajime's victory—or so I'd thought.

"Just so you know, it didn't end like this because your power was weaker than mine," said Hajime, spitting in the face of the theory I'd only just formulated. He was standing atop a truck in the center of the parking lot. That truck was atop another truck, beneath which lay another—a tower of trucks that looked almost like some sort of modern art installation. Hajime stood up at the very top of that tower...or maybe I should say that he reigned over the parking lot from its pinnacle.

His opponent dangled by his neck in Hajime's firm, one-handed grip. The bespectacled man didn't seem like he was fully conscious and just hung there, not resisting at all anymore. Hajime had made good on his promise—the man's formerly handsome face looked like a misshapen animation error after how many times Hajime had bludgeoned it.

Speaking of animation, you see scenes where someone holds their opponent up in the air one-handed like that quite a lot in anime. That's *much* harder to do in real life than they make it look, though. Holding all the body weight of a fully grown man up in the air with one arm would take a ridiculous amount of strength...unless you were Hajime, in which case you could let gravity do the heavy lifting and manage the pose with ease. Kiryuu Hajime: a man who'd spare no effort when it came to using his superpower to make himself look cool.



“No,” said Hajime, “you couldn’t match me...because you never gave your power a name.”

The bespectacled man said nothing. I couldn’t say for sure if he was unconscious or just speechless. *Yeah, I can relate. What on earth is Hajime talking about, and why did he pick now to bring it up?*

“You wouldn’t think highly of a parent who didn’t bother naming their kid, would you?” Hajime continued. “No, you’re damn right you wouldn’t! And a power is to those who take part in supernatural battles as a katana is to the samurai who wields it: it is their very *soul itself*! Players like you who bear no love for their power shall never be smiled upon by the goddess of victory!”

Hajime looked up at his foe as he spoke, his speech passionate—downright fervent—for no good reason I could identify. “In short, there’s just one reason you lost,” he said, his black and crimson eyes fixed upon the brutalized face of his foe. There wasn’t so much as an inkling of respect in that gaze of his—only derision. The way he looked at the man was a manifestation of the purest of contempt, the fiercest of rage, and the most tragic desolation.

“You just weren’t chuuni enough.”

Hajime spat the words, full of scorn, disdain, resentment, and derision...as well as an ever so slight trace of irritation—of dejection. Then he lowered his arm for just a moment, only to hurl the man upward a second later. He soared into the air, unnaturally high thanks to Hajime’s gravitational influence, until finally, the natural laws of physics took hold and he plummeted down once more. He didn’t make it all the way to the ground, though, as partway through his descent, Kiryuu Hajime rose to meet him—and pierced his hand directly through the man’s chest in a movement too fast for the eye to follow.

“Let ye be branded by the mark of depravity: ~~Sinner’s Sanction~~ ⇨!”

A crimson flower bloomed from the man’s back. Hajime’s arm had struck like a bolt of lightning, penetrating his heart with pinpoint precision.

~~Sinner’s Sanction~~ ⇨: piercing like the brightest light; piercing like the sharpest

spear. Hajime usually used his power over gravity to form a surface, to crush and bludgeon. For this move, however, he wielded it to create a single point. He condensed all the energy his power could output into a single directional force, resulting in a lance strong enough to penetrate even the mightiest of shields with ease.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Hajime withdrew his arm from his foe's chest. It had been instant death for the man, of course—no one could live after having their heart run through. That being said, this was the Spirit War, and he would be back before we knew it, his memories and power gone forever.

"Bwa ha ha," the victor cackled from atop his tower of trucks. He looked down upon the broken, fallen corpse of his erstwhile opponent...and he sneered. His right arm—the arm with which he'd dealt the killing blow—was covered with gore, and blood speckled his face and clothes. His formerly monochromatic image was now tainted with a slick, sickening shade of scarlet. Hajime raised his bloodstained hand to his mouth, stuck out his tongue...but then stopped just an instant before he went through with licking it, glancing down at me and Aki.

"Supernatural battle playbook, rule thirty: don't *actually* drink the blood of your enemies."

"Yeah. Good rule," I said with a nod. That'd be just plain unhygienic...though of course, that didn't stop plenty of characters in media from going through with it anyway.

Things got a little out of hand after that.

Thanks to Hajime's full-fledged supernatural battle out in the parking lot, our cover was blown wide open. A flood of enemies stormed out of the factory, and we were forced to beat a hasty retreat. Frankly, we weren't the right group to overcome numbers like those—Aki and I weren't fighters, and not even Hajime would've been able to protect us while also carrying on the fight himself (though I knew for a fact that he'd never admit it).

Our flight had been a literal one: we'd temporarily abandoned my car, joined hands with Hajime, and taken to the air to make a gravity-defying escape.

Holding our hands was all that Hajime had to do to bring us along by way of his power, thankfully, and before I knew it, we'd reached the very center of the compound. Our enemies had done a good job of blocking off one exit after another, leaving us with no choice but to flee deeper and deeper in until we were about as deep as we could get.

"Well, we were right about one thing," said Aki. "This place is *lousy* with Rogue players. Every one of the guys chasing us had powers."

The center of the compound happened to be where its tallest building was located, and the three of us were currently on that very structure. Not on *top* of it, to be clear, but rather on one of its walls. Hajime had shifted the vector of gravity in a localized vicinity around us, allowing us to sit on the wall as if it were the ground. It felt very, *very* weird, but I knew I'd just have to put up with that for now. I was exhausted from all that running away...or really, I couldn't keep up physically *or* mentally with all the physics-bending we'd done over the course of our escape, and so we were pausing for a moment in the best blind spot we could find to take a rest. I couldn't even handle most thrill rides, so gravity-inversion-enabled flight was pretty rough on me in all sorts of ways.

"Three fire-types, two wind-types, one who's got some sorta telekinesis thing going on, one water-type, one that uses shadows somehow...a couple rare ones too—one who manipulates the weather, and one who manipulates probability," said Aki, listing off all the powers she'd managed to scope out so far. If we could at least get a grasp of what sort of abilities the organization was working with, then this scouting mission wouldn't feel like a *total* waste of effort.

"Hmph," snorted Hajime. "Not exactly inspiring, huh? Feels like the sort of powers a bunch of grunts would have. These guys have some real expendable-underling energy going," he grumbled, sounding completely uninterested in them or their abilities. He let out a long, listless sigh. "I had high hopes for the magnetism guy, but was *that* ever a letdown...ugh. Is there no one here tough enough to quench my thirst for battle?"

Hajime's lapse into one of his usual hyperdramatic chuuni speeches sparked a thought in my mind. The way he'd said that *F* had been a letdown had grabbed my attention, specifically. When Hajime had beaten the man with glasses, he'd

definitely looked a little dissatisfied with the encounter. I was sure that he'd been disappointed by how his enemy hadn't been that tough after all and how he hadn't had the chance to pull out all the stops and make full use of his own power...but maybe I was wrong? Maybe he wasn't just looking for a chance to show off, but rather for something more specific in his foes? If so, what could that something be?

"How're you doing, Hitomi?" Hajime asked, breaking me out of the stupor I'd sunk into.

"Huh...? Ah, right—I'm feeling a lot better," I said. "Sorry for forcing you guys to take a break."

"Don't worry about it," said Hajime. "You're gonna have to put up with a bit more of this, though. Once the crowd in the parking lot thins out, we'll grab the car and make a break for it."

"Right!"

For all intents and purposes, our scouting mission had been called off the second the enemy had discovered us. I wasn't totally sure yet if the whole mission had worked out as a net positive for us, but we hadn't *lost* anything in particular by coming out here, so I figured I'd count it as good enough all around. I placed a hand on the wall beneath me to push myself to my feet, then flinched back as I realized that I was about to push down hard on a window. *Yikes, that was close! I would've been in huge trouble if it broke beneath me! I just can't get used to having gravity shifted by ninety degrees...*

"Wait...huh?" Glancing at the window I'd almost just pushed against, it hit me that I could catch a glimpse into the building's interior through it. All the other windows I'd seen so far had had their curtains drawn, but this one's had been left open just a crack.

The inside of the building was, in a word, vast. It seemed the place had been built without much in the way of interior walls, so it was pretty much just one big chamber that stretched on and on, horizontally and vertically. I guess it sort of looked like a school gym, actually. A couple dozen people were inside, hustling about here and there as they worked on *something*, though I couldn't quite tell what.

What really caught my eye was a glass tube in the center of the chamber. It seemed to be filled with some sort of green liquid, and everything in the room was set up around it. Pipes and meters were hooked up to the tube here and there, and a few monitors nearby had graphs and data tables displayed on them. Inside the tube, floating in the green fluid, was some sort of black-and-white mass. The white parts looked like fabric, maybe, and the black parts were...a ton of seaweed? I shook my head and took a closer look. *No, not seaweed...hair?*



I drew in a sharp, gasping breath. It was a girl. A *girl* was floating inside the tube. Her hair had to be several meters long, and it swayed gently in whatever sort of liquid she was suspended in. She was quite small, and only a couple scraps of dingy white fabric were covering her petite body. She wasn't moving so much as a muscle; her eyes were closed, so it almost looked like she was asleep.

"H-Hajime, Aki! C-Come look at this!" I frantically whispered. The two of them walked over to me and peeked into the window.

"The hell...?" muttered Hajime. "Are they waterboarding an innocent little girl? Did I miss something, or was *F* always an association of sadistic pedos?"

"Stop *joking* about this!" I snapped. "Seriously...is she okay? She's... She's not *dead*, right?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," said Hajime. "Can't exactly see well enough to tell from here."

"Do you think *F* might've kidnapped her? If so, then we have to save—"

"That's not it!" said Aki, her voice trembling as she cut me off. I looked over to find her face pallid and her eyes wide. A bead of cold sweat dripped down her cheek. "That's not some ordinary little girl they kidnapped—not by a long shot! She's... That girl's..." Aki flinched back, lost her balance, and fell to the wall with a thud.

"Wh-What's wrong? Are you okay?" I asked.

"*Head Hunting*," said Hajime, calling Aki by her power's name. "How does that girl appear in *your* eyes?"

Based on what Aki had told us, appraising the abilities of Players she looked at had become a matter of reflex for her. When dealing with any sort of situation that involved the Spirit War, she'd essentially set her power to activate by default. Knowing all that, it was easy to guess what had happened: *Head Hunting* had shown Aki something about that girl the moment she'd looked at her. What could she have seen, though? Aki looked like she was cowering away from a monster of unfathomable form and ferocity—what could she possibly have witnessed to cause her to make a face like *that*?

It took a moment, but Aki finally began to speak, slowly and gingerly. “That girl’s power...is called *System*. Or at least, that’s what the people in *F* call it. They say that it’s capable of interfering with the system that governs the world itself, so they just call it *System* for short,” she explained. “But...what the *hell*? How is that not cheating? There’s no way *anyone* could beat her... No, that’s not even right. It’s not even a question of winning or losing—she’s in a whole different *dimension* from us... How can a Player like her be allowed to *exist*? It’s like she was made for the specific purpose of winning,” Aki muttered bitterly. There was a note of frustration in her words.

Eventually, Aki looked up at me and Hajime. “Nobody can beat that girl. It’s not possible,” she spat. “She’s the ultimate Player. Her power—*System*—is something that nobody could ever stand a chance against.”

The ultimate Player. And this was coming from Aki, a girl who’d seen the inside details on countless powers. Hajime had apparently given *Head Hunting* its name on account of the fact that it enabled Aki to peer into the deepest reaches of her opponents’ heads, analyzing everything about their powers that could be found in their minds. In terms of information, she had the higher ground over anyone and everyone by default, but I’d *never* seen her act this frightened before. What she’d seen—what she’d learned—was so impactful, it had her entire body trembling.

“Her power...” Aki began. Then she gulped, and, lips quivering, told us everything she’d unearthed about the girl’s power in exacting detail. “Her power’s just one giant asspull.”

Chapter 5: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Third of the Twenty-First Year

We are as the bat.

Bearing fangs that pierce and wings that soar,
We stalk the dark and cower in fear of the light.

We are as the mantis.

Though our hands know naught but violence,
We clasp them together and pray to the heavens.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

Have you ever been reading a battle manga, or a sports manga, or whatever, and stopped to think, “Man, that plot twist was *such* an asspull”?

“It looks like I might have to start taking this seriously!”

“Just so you know, I’ve only been using X percent of my true power!”

“The *real* X is Y times more powerful than this!”

“I was planning on holding *this* power in reserve...”

“Using my secret weapon means putting my life at risk, but it looks like I have no choice.”

“*Thwump!* The truth is, I’ve been wearing weights this whole fight!”

“I’ve been wearing this to seal my true power away. Now that I’ve taken it off, I can go all out!”

“The truth is, while nobody was watching, I went through a ton of secret training!”

“I’ve never managed to make this move work in training, but now’s my only chance!”

“This whole time, you’ve been fighting one of my shadow clones!”

“We’re in dire straits, so it’s time to awaken the secret power that’s been slumbering within me!”

“Not even I knew that the power of the X bloodline flowed through my veins.”

Etcetera, etcetera. If you consume an even slightly appreciable amount of media, it’s very unlikely that you haven’t seen that sort of twist come up at least once. A character will say something like “I never wanted to use *this* power,” then suddenly they pull some sort of preposterous plot twist right out of their ass without the slightest bit of setup or foreshadowing. When a protagonist is up against an opponent whose power is overwhelmingly superior to theirs, instead of winning with a brilliant strategy or with some clever trick, they pull out a secret weapon, or a trump card, or an ultimate technique, or go through an awakening, and come out on top without breaking a sweat. An overwhelming victory enabled solely through deus ex machina: *that* is what we call an asspull.

Now, to be clear, I don’t want to make it sound like I’m criticizing that sort of plot development on the whole, per se. When all is said and done, it’s just another storytelling technique. Having a character suddenly reveal that their *true* power is whatever times mightier than what they’ve shown off so far’s exciting, and having your protagonist awaken to a hidden power is as hype as it gets. I mean, we’re talking about *entertainment* here—it’s totally natural to use that sort of device on occasion! Writing every last one of those plot twists off as stupid asspulls feels like it’s missing the point, in my opinion.

All that being said, the whole concept could actually be pretty terrifying when viewed from a different perspective. As far as supernatural battles are concerned, an asspull is pretty much the ultimate shortcut. No matter how desperate of a corner a character gets written into, they’re always just one deus ex machina away from pulling out all the stops and going into full OP AF mode.

If somebody with that sort of plot armor backing them up were to *really* exist...there'd very simply be no winning against them.

“That’s right. It’s hopeless. No Player could ever possibly hope to beat *System*.”

To run through what happened after our glimpse into *F*’s main building, in brief: we somehow managed to escape from the enemy base and make our way back to our own hideout. All the members of *Fallen Black* were now gathered up in the dart bar, and Leatia had shown up as well for good measure. Apparently, she was there to deliver a message from the War Management Committee to us—from what I could gather, the Committee had decided to use her as their primary means of conveying information to us as a group.

To start, Aki had taken center stage to explain *F*’s ultimate trump card, *System*, to the rest of our members. “I guess if I were putting it simply, I’d say that *System* has the ultimate counter ability,” she said. “No matter how strong her opponent is, no matter how close of a fight it turns out to be, at the last second, she’ll pull some new, ridiculous power out of nowhere and win.”

One of the things that Aki had clarified in her explanation was that *System* was both the name of the girl’s power and the name of the girl herself. *F*’s people didn’t bother giving her a real name and just called her by her power’s name instead.

“So, for example, like...just pulling something random out of a hat here... Okay, imagine she’s fighting a pyrokinetic. At first, the pyro’s got the upper hand, and it looks like they’re dominating the battle, right? But then, as soon as they have *System* backed into a corner and it looks like the fight’s over, her power activates.”

To awaken to a new power the moment your back is up against the wall—just like how it would happen in a shonen manga written to keep its readers flipping page after page from the sheer, nail-biting excitement of it all.

“So all of a sudden, it turns out that *System*’s actually been hiding away the power to manipulate *water* this whole time! The second she’s done for, the most convenient possible power gets deus ex machina’d in to save her.”

If I were to put it in other words, I’d say that her power took awakenings, the

classic cliché of any supernatural battle series, and embodied their very concept in a superpower.

“So friggin’ what?” growled Toki, who was leaning up against the wall. “I don’t get this ‘asspull’ and ‘deus’ garbage, but if she’s all about counterattacks, then all you have to do is kill her ass with your first move, right?”

“Hah! Not happening. Any old schmuck could think up a plan like *that*, and if it were that easy, I wouldn’t be freaking out like this!” said Aki in a tone that made it clear she meant every bit of the offense her phrasing implied. “Even if you did *somehow* manage to instakill *System*, she’d suddenly have a power that only activates the moment she dies, or the power to be reborn instantaneously in a new, more powerful form, or something.”

Toki looked like he wanted to say something in protest for a moment, but Aki had shut down his point pretty brutally, and all he could do was click his tongue in irritation.

“O-Okay, but, umm...what about *after* she comes back to life?” asked Fan. “What if somebody beats her *after* her power’s already activated to rewrite things once? Like, if she awakened to a water power to beat somebody who used fire, couldn’t somebody who uses electricity beat her really easily right afterward?”

“Nope, that’s out too,” said Aki, curtly dismissing the idea offhand.

As a side note, I was pretty positive that Fan was pulling the idea that electricity is super effective against water straight out of *Pokémon*, but I decided that this wasn’t the right moment to derail things by pointing out that it didn’t really work like that in real life. Absolutely pure water isn’t even conductive at all, actually, and water with other stuff mixed into it—like seawater—can conduct and disperse electricity super easily. Basically, everything I knew about electricity made me think that it wasn’t *necessarily* always at an advantage against water.

In the meantime, of course, Aki kept picking Fan’s idea to pieces from a totally different direction. “If you had a guy who could use electricity attack her, she’d just awaken *again* to a power that just so happened to perfectly nullify his. That’s the scariest part about *System*—her power’s limitless. She can awaken

over and over and over again. She's a one-trick pony, sure, but it's such a good trick that it just makes her *more* unbeatable."

So it's not a onetime deal? That meant that no matter how many times you went after her, no matter how many people you set on her, she'd just come back each and every time you beat her, getting a little more powerful with each iteration. The awakenings, dei ex machina, and convenient plot twists would never end.

"We just can't beat *System*. It's impossible. Ryuu's gravity, Tomi's eyes, Gawanagi's gaps, Toks's knife, Fanfan's personalities—*none* of them would work on her," Aki said, biting her lip with frustration. Strictly speaking, it didn't seem to me that they wouldn't *work* on her—it was just that *System* would then proceed to adapt and overwrite whatever it was we'd done to her.

"You done now? In that case, I've got some news for you as well," said Leatia, who'd been floating about cross-legged in the air this whole time. She sounded like our conversation had been boring her to tears. "So, I'm just gonna ignore the fact that you people—well, just Hajime, really—blew off my orders and went out to cause trouble on your own. You humans *are* supposed to have the freedom to choose how you'll participate in the War, so not much I can do about it," she said. For someone who'd just said she'd ignore our transgression, she sure *sounded* like she was still upset with us.

"Anyway, the Committee's done some more digging into *F*, and we've figured out what they're after and who their ringleader is. We'll start with the ringleader—they're being led by a spirit named Zeon. Zeon's the one who's been empowering all these Rogue Players, and they also founded the whole organization. The Rogues themselves, meanwhile, are most likely just a means to buy time. They were supposed to catch the Committee's attention and keep us distracted, from the look of it."

"To buy time for *what?*" I asked reflexively.

Leatia sighed. "Uh, isn't it obvious? It's to buy time for them to get *System* up and running." I fell silent, and a moment later, Leatia continued. "We knew they were making *something*, but I never would've guessed they were creating a Player from the ground up. Hate to say it, but I've actually gotta be grateful for

Hajime's little overstep, in that sense. We know all about *System's* power now thanks to Aki, and that's made *F's* ultimate objective obvious."

Leatia paused for a moment to look around at all of us, then dropped the bombshell. "*F's* objective—in other words, Zeon's objective—is to bring the Fifth Spirit War to an end. To do that, they're creating the ultimate living weapon, which they'll use to wipe out every last remaining Player."

So they really are trying to end the War. It seemed Toki's shot in the dark had actually hit its mark.

"Huuuh. Yeah, that scans," Aki muttered with a rather self-satisfied look on her face. "So, that's why they set up *System's* power to work like that. It all makes sense now."

"H-Huh? What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You don't get it? Her whole thing is that every time she gets beaten, she awakens and gets stronger and stronger, right? And her power doesn't have a limit, right? So what would happen if she keeps fighting for long enough?"

Every time she's in trouble, she awakens. If that pattern keeps repeating, then eventually...

"Power creep. Duh," said Aki. "She'll end up as stupidly OP as the main character of a battle manga that's been serialized for decades. The more *System* fights, the more of a monster she'll turn into."

An ever-escalating power curve was a problem that any battle series that went on for long enough would eventually have to address. The difference between characters' power levels at the beginning of a manga compared to its later stages can be positively absurd. If *System* had the potential to manifest that phenomenon in the real world, then all the ordinary Players who went up against her would inevitably get massacred. Suddenly, we'd all be demoted to the level of early-arc bit villains.

System's purpose was to wipe the board—to bring the War to a full stop by taking out every single other Player. Of *course* they would give her an ultimate power that could win against any other ability in the book. The more she'd fight, the stronger she would become, and the faster that the process would

repeat itself. Even on the off chance she *were* ever defeated, that would just provide her another chance to awaken and start all over. Her power was godlike, pure and simple.

“H-Hey, Leatia? Can’t you just disqualify her from the war...?” I asked, clinging to my one last shred of hope. “She *has* to count as an irregular element, right? That seems like totally valid grounds for disqualification!” Judging by how she’d described the process, I reasoned that the Committee would surely be up for giving her the boot.

Leatia, however, shook her head. “*System’s* not like you people. When all’s said and done, your powers are basically just on loan from us spirits. Meanwhile, *System’s* power was a part of her from the moment she was created. She’s a natural-born Player, I guess you could say. Strictly speaking, she’s not even human—’course, she’s not exactly a spirit either...”

She’s not a human or a spirit? Then what is she?! Gaaah, I don’t understand any of this!

“So? What happens now?” asked Akutagawa from over on the couch. I got the sense he was trying to get us to hurry up and get to the point. Things were looking about as bad as they’d ever been, but his eyes had still been glued to a handheld game console throughout the whole conversation. “I get that *System’s* bad news, but isn’t the Committee working out a plan to take that monster down?”

“Nothing’s been decided yet,” said Leatia. “The Committee’s pretty split on what we should do. Some of us even think that *System* bringing the war to an end would be a valid way for it to wrap up.”

“So it’s still in the air,” Akutagawa sighed. “You’re always noncommittal like that, Leatia. No wonder you’re just a gofer to them.”

“What?! You wanna try saying that to my face, you gloomy little asshole?!”

“Not particularly,” said Akutagawa, brushing off Leatia’s rage like it was nothing.

The atmosphere in the room was starting to feel uncomfortably tense. It goes without saying that none of us had a clear idea of what we would do next. Just

then, amid all that tension, the sound of a phone vibrating suddenly rang out. We all looked over into the corner, where Hajime was sitting on the couch he'd claimed as his own. He hadn't said a word since we got back, but now he pulled out his phone and answered it.

"Hello? Yeah, it's me... Oh, *that*. My bad. Slipped my mind," he said. He looked remarkably serious and kept talking for a little while longer, but before long, his mood seemed to sour. "Yeah, I get the picture. Smell you later, shithead," he spat, then hung up, paused, and heaved a sigh. "Feels like it's always one bad thing after another, huh?" he commented.

"W-Wait, what's wrong?" I asked. "Who were you talking to just now? Wh-What happened...?" *And how could things possibly get any worse than they already are?*

Hajime's shoulders slumped, and he cradled his head in his hands. He looked downright despondent as he glanced up, just barely enough to look at us, and spoke in a voice so quiet it was practically a whisper.

"I just got fired."

"..."

In that instant, I could've sworn my consciousness had departed from my body. I was *completely* gobsmacked. I think my spirit made it most of the way to Brazil or so before finally turning around and coming back to me. It was only then that I had the presence of mind to give Hajime's words actual, careful consideration, and when I'd finally finished thinking them through, I let out the sigh of a lifetime, then shouted with all my might.

"Read the *goddamn* room, Hajime!"

"Look, what do you want from me?" Hajime snapped back. "Am I supposed to *not* pick up when I get a call from my boss?"

"That was your boss?! You said 'smell you later, shithead' to *your boss*?!"

"He just wouldn't shut up! He was all, 'you're fired, you're fired,' and I just lost it! Ugggh," Hajime sighed, "I *totally* forgot I had a shift today."

"Then it's *your* fault for ditching work!" I yelled. *Now that I think about it, he*

did *say something about having work tonight right after we got to F's base*. It was well past dark, which meant that he'd unquestionably missed a shift without even calling in. I had the impression that he'd already been on thin ice with his manager, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back—or rather, got the camel canned.

"Man, what now?" Hajime mused. "I was all ready to quit, but it just had to go and turn into some sorta *fight*. It's gonna be way too awkward to go to that convenience store from now on... Dammit, I shouldn't have gotten a job at the closest one to my place! Where am I supposed to buy *Jump* and smokes from now on?"

"I don't *care*!" I shouted, then stormed *right* up to Hajime and leaned in as close as I could bring myself to get to him. "That's *enough*, Hajime! We're talking about something *really serious* right now! Were you even *listening*?!"

"Sure I was," said Hajime. "You were going on about how amazing *System* is, right?"

"I—I mean, yeah," I said, a little taken aback. "But...do you *really* get what's going on with her?"

"*System*," Hajime repeated. "A simple name...but not a bad one. Feels a little sloppy, though. Like the sorta name you'd churn out in your free time, y'know? Real rush job. I give it a six out of ten."

"Nobody asked you about her *name*!"

"Well, what else is there to talk about?"

"Her *power*! How it actually *works*! You get it, right?! It's completely unbeatable!" I wailed.

"Bwa ha ha!" Hajime cackled, a smirk spreading across his face. "Unbeatable? What a joke. She just powers up every time she's in a tough spot, right? That's *nothing*. So she goes through an awakening in moments of mortal peril? Big whoop—I can do that too," Hajime declared, leaning back into the couch in a pose that spoke of pure, leisurely arrogance as he gestured at himself with his thumb. He was acting perfectly cool, perfectly uninterested, as if he were just stating the obvious.

“I’m just so friggin’ awesome I haven’t had the chance yet, but someday, some big, scary-ass enemy’s gonna appear, and I’ll have to awaken to take ‘em down. It’s a given. After all—I’m Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, reincarnation of the highest-ranking of all the fallen angels: the primeval progenitor!”

Words failed me. It felt like I was losing my mind. *What the actual hell is he talking about? I can’t keep up with this nonsense! I just can’t! I have no idea if he’s kidding or not!*

“How long do you think we’re gonna just sit here and listen to this, huh?!” A dull, heavy thud rang out from the back of the bar, and I spun around just in time to see Toki pull his fist back from the wall he’d just punched. He was shooting Hajime a look so sharp, it was practically bladed. “It’s just one goddamn pile of stupid, pointless crap after another with you!” Toki shouted. “Well, I’ve had it! I’m not putting up with this asshole and his chuuni bullshit for another second!”

Toki stomped across the bar toward us, shoved me aside, then grabbed Hajime by the lapel. “Just *thinking* about working under a dipshit like *you* makes me wanna hurl,” Toki growled.

“I’d let go if I were you,” Hajime blithely replied. “This coat’s got anti-corporeal *and* anti-magical defensive enhancements worked into its design. Touching it for long’s bad news for an ordinary human.”

He said the most profoundly absurd things in the most profoundly serious of tones, and Toki wasn’t having it. The scowl he directed at Hajime took on an even sharper, more dangerous air. “Looks like I picked the wrong guy to team up with,” he said.

“Bwa ha ha! I’m still better than your *last* boss, though, aren’t I? Now *that* was a riot! The leader of Cruise—sorry, *former* leader—bowing and scraping, head pressed to the concrete, *begging* me to spare his pathetic life!”

Suddenly, Toki’s expression shifted dramatically. He’d been angry before, yes, but now his eyes were full of clear and undisguised malice. He released Kiryuu’s coat, only to reach into his own pocket and pull out his knife—his beat-up, jagged, serrated, unfoldable jackknife.

Wait—no way, right? He’s not seriously planning on fighting, is he? Here?

Against Hajime? Is this about to turn into an actual supernatural battle?! But then, just as I was trying to figure out how to stop the two of them...

“Hyahaaah!”

...a shrill, piercing laugh rang out, tearing my attention away from the imminent disaster.

“Hya ha ha ha ha haaa! I *like* it! Do it! Go to *town* on each other, you smelly little manwhores! Hell, let me in on the action! You’ve been caught in the act, so why not make it a threesome?! Hya ha haaa, let’s battle! Let’s get it *on*! Careful, though—you might just end up getting your ass beat by a *girl*!”

Her voice was as harsh and grating as nails on a chalkboard. She was as hyper as she was vulgar. Her tone was upbeat in the least appropriate way possible.

Oh, crap. Oh, crap, crap, crap! I found myself shivering as I turned my head to look at her. There she was—Fan, sitting cross-legged atop the bar, her nurse outfit’s buttons partially undone to expose an ample portion of her chest, and her skirt just *barely managing* to cover what lay beneath it. Her mouth was twisted into a sadistic smile, and the expectant way she licked her lips only added to that impression. Technically speaking, though, the first thing I said wasn’t actually correct. I wasn’t looking at Yusano Fantasia at all.

Why would one of her other personalities have to take the driver’s seat now?! And to make matters worse, it just *had* to be Grotesqua: the most belligerent and least reasonable personality of them all!

“Hya ha ha ha! Anyway, y’know something? Fantasia was about to *snap* before I took over! ‘I can’t take having *this* assbat as my boss for another second! It’s supposed to be the boss’s job to bring us together at a time like this, not tear us apart,’ she said! Soooo, that’s how I ended up in the driver’s seat! Get! The! *Picture*, pal?! Hya ha ha haaa, what a goddamn *loser* you are! Seriously, Kiryuu, you’ve got a *middle schooler* giving you shit for being a crap leader!”

Brutal and merciless though her criticism was, I could also hear a certain trace of sadness in Fan’s—or rather, Grotesqua’s—words. It’s not like I couldn’t understand where she was coming from. As kind and innocent as Fan was, even *she* couldn’t help but feel let down by Hajime, considering the state of things.

Heck, I'd been putting up with him since high school and even I was pretty stunned by just how bad of an attitude he was showing us.

"So, yeah, that's how it's gonna be!" said Grotesqua. "Time for a real...uprising? Coup d'état? Regime change? Hya ha ha, *whatever!* Point! Is! It's high time for you to give up your big ol' boss hat to li'l miss Grotesqua, Kiryuu Haaajiiimeeeee! You're just not cut out for giving people orders—sucks to suck!"

Toki clicked his tongue irritably. "Ugh. Just *had* to be Grotesqua. Can't stand this bitch," he grumbled, his knife held at the ready as he slowly backed toward the bar counter. "But there's one thing I *can* agree with her on: you're not cut out to give orders, all right!"

"Woo hoo! *Slay* me, Toki-toks! Least *somebody* here sees it how it is!" shouted Grotesqua as she leaped from the bar top to the floor, stepping over to stand beside Toki. The two of them formed a united front facing off against Hajime, who was still lounging it up on the couch. They stared him down, ready to erupt in violence at the drop of a hat.

Zigzag Jigsaw: a power of laceration and assassination. *Sex Eclipse*: a power that causes the fragmentation of one's own identity. The wielders of those two abilities formed the core of *Fallen Black's* primary combat unit. Unlike Aki and I, who mostly stuck to the sidelines, those two boasted the absolute strength and genuine lethality needed to dominate the sort of battlefields we found ourselves upon, and however much faith I had in Hajime, I couldn't imagine that even *he* could handle both of them at once.

The situation was as critical as it had ever been—a powder keg set to ignite at the slightest of sparks—and yet nobody moved to stop them. *All* of us were just as disappointed in Hajime, most likely. And me? I didn't know what I should do. I *wanted* to stop them, of course. No matter how you look at it, brawling with your own allies would be a terrible mistake, and all the more so considering our most powerful foe to date had just appeared on the scene. *Why the hell are we having a falling-out when the situation could hardly get any grimmer, anyway?! But what can I possibly do to turn this around...?*

"Hya ha ha! Don't be getting any ideas 'bout what happens *after* we murder

his ass, though, Toki-toks! *I'm* gonna be our new boss, you got that?! Don't you go forgetting it!" chattered Grotesqua. She hadn't stopped blabbing away the whole time I was agonizing over my predicament, actually. She was a real chatty kid...I mean, if she even counted as a kid. That was sort of unclear.

"And y'know what I'm gonna do first?!" Grotesqua continued. "I'm nixing *Fallen Black* and giving our team a name that *doesn't* totally suck! We get to have a nice, *pretty* name from now on! Same for the powers—*Sex Eclipse*? Hya ha haaa, are you for *real*?! *Gross*! What the hell's that even supposed to *mean*?! I bet he just gets off on the idea of making a middle schooler go around saying *sex* all the time! What a goddamn *creeper*! Hey, you listening, Kiryuu Hell-*whatever*?! Your stupid names friggin' *suck a—*"

A black streak flashed through my line of sight.

It happened so fast that it took me a few seconds to even realize that said streak was, in fact, Hajime. A powerful, dull *thud* rang out through the room as the wall across from the sofa he'd been sitting on warped dramatically, forming a crater in its surface. At the center of that crater was Yusano Fantasia—no, Yusano Grotesqua, who'd been slammed into the wall with tremendous force. Hajime's slender, bony fingers were buried in her blonde hair as he squeezed her head in a viselike, one-handed claw grip, doing his very best to compress her skull in on itself. She'd ended up splayed out against the wall in a pose that almost made her look like a criminal who'd been bound up and crucified.

"I'm *sorry*, I didn't quite catch that," said Hajime, speaking slowly, deliberately, as if trying to drive each and every word into Grotesqua's skull as he drove said skull *physically* into the wall. "What, exactly, were you saying about the names I come up with?"

"Ghaah...agggh, ah, aaah," Grotesqua groaned, but she didn't *say* anything. She probably *couldn't* say anything, actually. The little moans of pain she was making were probably the only sound she could manage at the moment.

"Go on, tell me. What were you saying about my names? That they're the coolest you've ever heard?"

“That... That *hurts!* Aaaagh!” Grotesqua finally spit out.

“What, did you think a high-and-mighty fallen angel like me wouldn’t dare lay hands on a little girl? You had your hopes up that I wouldn’t ever hurt my allies? You thought you’d just get away with your little farce of a falling-out ‘cause you never *dreamed* I’d use my full power on you over it? Figured that you couldn’t *possibly* get killed off yet since you haven’t even shown off half of what your power’s capable of? Or maybe you figured Toki’d get offed first since he’s a guy? Or *maybe*, just maybe, you believed that when all was said and done, Kiryuu Hajime’s a kindhearted man who cares about his friends?”

A mirthful, mocking smirk spread across Hajime’s face. “Well, too bad. I’m *real* goddamn easy to provoke, see.” A lethal animosity blazed in his mismatched eyes as he channeled his power into the hand he was holding Grotesqua with.

“Scatter like leaves on the wind: *Ruined’s Raking!*”

Ruined’s Raking: a five-pronged slashing attack, enabled by Hajime’s power. It operated on the same principle as *Sinner’s Sanction* ⇨, only instead of concentrating gravitational energy into a single point, here he stretched it out into lines of force. It was an attack that refined the power of gravity into its thinnest and sharpest form possible, honing it to an edge that no knife could ever hope to achieve—an edge that could slice through the human body with the greatest of ease. To put it simply, it was a move that gave Hajime unimaginably powerful claws of gravity.

That, incidentally, was part of where its name came from—it was supposed to be a pun on “to rake,” as in “to rake your opponent with your claws,” and “rake,” the garden implement. Hajime claimed that the imagery worked since the attack made his enemy’s blood scatter into the air like crimson leaves, fallen from a bare and ruined tree, gathered into the cool autumn breeze... *Wait, no, that doesn’t matter! This is no time to be explaining the origins of the power’s name, even if he has delivered that speech to me dozens of times!*

Hajime still had Grotesqua’s head grasped in his hand. Was he seriously

planning to activate *Ruined's Raking* while she was in that state, unleashing it on her at point-blank range? Sure, it'd be a cool way to use the power, and it'd be the most chuuni thing he could possibly choose to do, but it would *also* shred her head into a thousand pieces!

"Gyaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!"

A bloodcurdling scream rang out through the bar. I reflexively clamped my eye shut, wincing away from the spectacle. A moment later, I heard a series of drips and splatters—the sound of some sort of liquid splashing onto the floor.

No way. He didn't, right? Surely Hajime wouldn't really do that to Grotesqua—to Fan? Just because she made fun of how he names stuff...?

"Psych! Gotcha."

A bright, cheerful voice sliced straight through the tension in the air, blowing it all away in an instant.

"Bwa ha ha! C'mon, I was *kidding*! Just a big joke! Don't take it so seriously, sheesh. After all, when all's said and done, I'm just a kindhearted man who cares about his friends, right?"

I was finally able to bring myself to look up just in time to see Hajime let Grotesqua go. Her knees trembled for just a moment before she sank to the ground on the spot.

"Grotesqua," I began, then paused. "Ah, wait, no—are you back to being Fan now?"

Whichever she was, she didn't reply. She just sat there, eyes wide open, quietly sobbing.

"Oh, now look! You made her cry!" I sighed. Grotesqua—no, it *had* to be Fan, judging by her youthful expression and the mild-mannered look in her eyes—must've reverted back to her usual self at some point without me noticing. Anyway, *Fan's* face was flushed red, and she was crying inconsolably. Said face, however, featured not so much as a single scratch. Hajime hadn't actually used his power—he'd just shouted its name, that was all.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *Oh, thank goodness...but wait. Huh? If she wasn't decapitated, then what was that splashing noise?* I'd been all but certain it was the sound of blood splattering onto the floor.

"U-Ugggh," Fan groaned between snuffles. The moment I took a closer look at her, the source of the sound hit me. Specifically, it was the way she was sitting, her hands holding the hem of her skirt to the ground, like she was trying to cover something up with it. That something, I assumed, being a puddle. Fan...had most likely wet herself.

To be totally clear, I *really* couldn't blame her. The way Hajime had been acting a moment ago was terrifying enough to nearly give *me* a heart attack, and I'd only been a bystander! Fan, meanwhile, had been in the thick of it, having all that concentrated hostility directed right at her. I honestly couldn't even imagine how scared she'd been—and rightfully so, considering that, as best as I could tell...he'd been serious. For a moment, he really *had* planned on murdering her.

"So, Toki," Hajime casually continued, "did *you* have something to say to me too?"

Toki hesitated for just a moment, then looked away. "Forget about it."

"Oh? I'll do just that, then!" said Hajime with a smirk. "You're the last person here I'd want to fight, y'know? *Zigzag Jigsaw's* one brutal-ass power—even I'd have a *little* trouble dealing with it."

"Put a sock in it, asshole," Toki sullenly muttered as he threw himself onto the couch. His fists were still clenched, and it seemed he was just barely keeping his anger in check, but he didn't seem inclined to lash out at his leader again. The difference between the two's capabilities had been made painfully clear to him. I could tell that when Hajime had shown us how fast he could *really* move when he felt like it, Toki had been just as unable to follow his movements as I had been.

Japanese martial arts tend to put a heavy emphasis upon how one closes the gap between oneself and one's opponent, and the ideal form of that movement involves doing so all but instantaneously. Surprisingly, the most important factor that plays into achieving that effect isn't how quickly you move; it's your

ability to influence your opponent's *perception* of how you move. You have to pay close attention to both your and their footwork, center of balance, stance, height, line of sight, etcetera etcetera. Only when you can keep track of all those factors together *and* understand them well enough to take advantage of them can you achieve the sort of seemingly instantaneous movement that a true master is capable of.

Hajime, of course, was very familiar with the concept. He'd embarked on a secretive training regimen to master the skill back when he was in middle school, and now he'd finally managed to make it his own...thanks *entirely* to his superpower. With perfect control over the force of gravity, movement so fast it defies explanation became perfectly possible. He could move at impossible speeds from impossible poses in impossible directions with ease. His capacity for movement alone was a truly formidable skill, and that skill was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to the abilities his power granted him.

I felt a sense of newfound understanding. It was all coming back to me now —*this* is why Kiryuu Hajime was our leader. It wasn't because of his popularity or because he had any sort of innate leadership skills. He was broke, unemployed, homeless, and completely incapable of living independently. He had no common sense and no charisma. He was an utterly hopeless man from top to bottom, but when all was said and done, the reason his allies had stuck with him for so long was exceedingly simple: he was *overwhelmingly* powerful. Or, in other words, he was dangerous.

Everyone except for me had chosen to join up with Hajime exclusively because they didn't want to be his enemy. His borderline unfair degree of control over his gravitational powers and the unpredictable nature of his personality put together resulted in an unimaginably dangerous combination. There was no telling what he'd do at any given moment, and as such, there was no telling what he was capable of—and that fact scared our allies into submission. His case of chuunibyou was so terrifyingly terminal that sometimes it really felt like he'd be willing to destroy the whole world on a whim.

"Hah! You guys done putting on your stupid little soap opera?" snorted Leatia. She'd been sitting off on the sidelines watching over the course of our near falling-out. "So? What's the plan, Hajime? You *are* supposed to be the boss,

right? Isn't it your job to set your organization's course?"

"Bwa ha ha!" Hajime cackled. "Whoa there, Leatia, why the rush? You seem like you're in an awful hurry to move the conversation along! It's almost like you're *worried* about something, huh?"

"Excuse me?" snapped Leatia.

"All I'm saying is that if you *want* me to crush *F* for you, why not just come out and ask?"

Leatia hesitated for the briefest of moments. "I don't know what you're talking about. I told you *not* to stick your nose into all this, didn't I? The Committee hasn't reached a consensus about our next step yet, so—"

"There—that's just it," said Hajime, cutting Leatia off as if he'd been waiting for her to say that. "The War Management Committee hasn't reached a decision yet, sure. You keep saying that—but *why* are you telling that to us in the first place?"

Leatia fell silent, and Hajime grinned. "I thought something was strange when you told me where *F*'s base was yesterday. You tell me to 'sit tight and not cause trouble,' then tell me exactly where the base is a second later? Seems *really* unnatural, huh? If you'd *really* wanted me to stay out of it, you could've just kept quiet, right? So I just couldn't help but think that really, you were after something *else* the whole time... 'Course, I took the bait like a chump yesterday regardless. I wanted to check out *F*'s base for my own reasons, and all."

Hajime was a born contrarian. He *loved* defying expectations above all else, and much to my surprise, it seemed that Leatia had seen through that side of his personality after all. If you wanted Hajime to do something, you just had to tell him not to do anything at all. Unfortunately for her, though, Hajime had also seen through *her* personality. In this instance, he was one step ahead of her.

"'Sit tight and don't cause trouble,' eh? Why not be honest for once? Just go ahead and tell me to stir shit up. And throw in a 'please,' while you're at it," Hajime said with a defiant smirk. "And while I'm at it, why don't I take a few wild guesses? I'd bet that 'Zeon' spirit you mentioned was actually a member of the War Management Committee at some point, right? But then the Committee did something so messed up that Zeon couldn't take it anymore and decided to

stab them in the back and bring the whole War to a grinding halt. The rebellion's coming from *inside* the house, y'know? *That's* why the Committee can't be too blatant about making a move on *F*—they know that the farther they step out of the shadows, the more their dirty laundry gets exposed as a result. And *that's* where I come in."

Hajime paused, but Leatia still wasn't saying a word, so he carried on. "They probably thought that if I wipe *F* off the map, they could all say hurray and pretend it never happened to begin with, right? The tricky part about Zeon's plan is that if it all goes through, it'll bring the war to an end without ever actually breaking any rules. Making an unbeatable Player's one hell of a loophole, after all."

As Hajime rattled off conjecture after conjecture, I frantically attempted to process them and keep up with his train of logic. If I was understanding him correctly, the whole matter boiled down to the Committee trying to save face. The Spirit War was intended for its viewers to gamble on, and the War Management Committee were basically the bookkeepers. Being a bookie's profitable, sure, but it also means you have to take on all sorts of risks.

"I don't know if this is *your* plan or the Committee's," said Hajime, "but I gotta admit, you'd get a pretty sweet deal out of it! Setting things up so that someone *ignoring* your orders gives you everything you want on a silver platter? You really *do* know how I operate, huh?"

"Seriously..." muttered Leatia, "drop dead. Like, literally, go die." She told Hajime to drop dead so often that I almost thought of it as a sort of catchphrase for her, but for once, the way she said it made it sound like she *really* meant it. The fact that she wasn't arguing against anything he'd said, meanwhile, confirmed to me that Hajime was right on the money.

"It's not like I'm *opposed* to taking out *F*, you know? Throwing down with this so-called 'ultimate Player' *System* sounds pretty fun. But y'know what I *can't* stand? I can't stand the way you seem to think you can *control* me," said Hajime, raising a hand to his head and tapping his temple with his finger. "The only things that're allowed to control me are the crazed, destructive impulses that run through my head."

Hajime spun about on his heel as he delivered the line. I was on the fence about whether it had made him sound cool or just plain demented, but *he* was obviously under the impression that it made him look like the biggest badass on the planet, and he strode with a spring in his step toward the bar's front door. "Lemme teach you some human manners, Leatia," he said as he walked. "When we ask someone for a favor, the polite thing we do is say 'Please.'"

"You're the *last* person I wanna hear getting high-and-mighty about *manners*, shithead," said Leatia with a scowl.

"Bwa ha ha! Then I guess these negotiations have broken down! Starting now, everything related to dismantling *F* is anathema to *Fallen Black*. You got that, guys?!" he called out across the bar. "'Course, if anyone wants to go pick a fight on their own time, that's a different story. Getting yourselves killed's your own prerogative."

And with that final, unilateral, yet half-hearted order, Hajime left the bar. I stood there gaping for just a second before chasing after him, mostly on reflex. The bar's door led to a stairwell that connected the fourth and fifth floors of the building. *Dead Space* had set things up such that the moment you stepped outside, the entrance to the bar would vanish from sight. I didn't pay that any mind, though, and dashed down the stairs after Hajime.

"Wait! Wait, I said!" I shouted. "Where are you going, Hajime?"

"Where?" Hajime repeated, then let out a chuckle. "Wherever the wind takes me, obviously."

"Okay, but if the wind's planning on taking you home, you should know that the door's locked."

Hajime, my resident freeloader, froze on the spot. Then he held out his hand in a silent request that I, his de facto landlady, lend him the key. I stepped down onto the landing he was on, handed it over, then looked up at his face. "Hey, Hajime...seriously, what are you planning on doing now?"

"Huh?" Hajime grunted. "Going home and going to bed, that's all. I got canned, remember? Oh, right—looks like I'll have a lot of free time tomorrow, so I was thinking of paying a visit to our old school. It's been ages since I said hi to Miss Satomi, and—"

“Not *that!*” I said. I hadn’t meant to shout, but it sort of just turned out that way, and I took a second to collect myself before choking out what I really wanted to say. “The War might *end*, you know?”

This time, I surprised myself with just how torn up I sounded about it. *Huh? That’s weird. I’m almost making it sound like I don’t want the War to end. What am I, an arms dealer?*

I had never been particularly enthusiastic about the War itself to begin with. I was only even participating as Hajime’s chaperone, basically. I’d never liked violence, and I *hated* fighting—or at least I said I hated it, despite having never actually been in a proper fight. The sight of blood made me feel sick, and seeing people *die* made me feel like I was going to hurl.

I’d always felt comfortable in the knowledge that the War would end someday. But that’s just the thing—I thought it would end *someday*, far off in the future.

If *F* succeeded in ending the War on their terms, though, it would mean the end for *Fallen Black* as well. *System* would defeat us, we’d lose our powers and memories, and we’d all go back to our former, everyday lives. We’d only just come together, and we’d be split apart again, just like that. I couldn’t help but feel a little sad about it.

And then, above all else...there was Hajime. What would *he* do if the War ended? For all I knew, he might vanish from my life all over again, just like when we’d graduated from high school... Just the thought of it made me feel a painful ache in my chest. It made tears pool in my eyes. It felt like I’d *lost* something, like a hole had been opened in my heart, and the sensation was overwhelming.

“Don’t worry, Hitomi,” said Hajime, laying a gentle hand upon my head. “I won’t let them end it.”

“Huh...?” I said, looking up at him.

“You don’t seriously think I’d let something *this* entertaining end just like that, do you?” asked Hajime, his voice filled with an ebullient confidence. “I don’t care if *F* tries to end it, or *System*, or anyone else—I’ll stop them. I’ll keep dragging out these good times for as long as they can possibly last. Like a manga that’s just too damn popular to let end.”

Chapter 6: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Fourth of the Twenty-First Year

Grasp as you will, clutch though you may

Ever shall they fall twixt your impotent fingers

Water or sand, seconds or lifetimes

None shall ever grace the palms of your hands

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

The next evening, at around the time the local schools were getting out for the day, Hajime really *did* head out to pay a visit to our alma mater, Senkou High. He invited me along, but I ended up turning him down. I just wasn't feeling up to it, somehow.

The rest of the members of *Fallen Black*, meanwhile, all went back to their own private lives. None of them decided to launch a suicidal solo assault on *F* in the end, though I seriously doubted that any of them were motivated by a desire to obey their boss's orders. If I had to guess how they felt about him, I'd say they were fed up—*beyond* fed up—and had lost their enthusiasm for our whole arrangement. It felt like the silent consensus was that if *F* really did bring the War to an end, nobody would particularly mind.

The Spirit War motivated its Players to stay alive and become one of the Final Eight with the promise that doing so would allow them to have a wish granted, but none of our members seemed particularly enticed by that prize. Actually, when I really thought about it, I had to wonder if Hajime had *deliberately* recruited people like that onto his team. Of course, I was no exception. It's not like I didn't have any wishes I'd like to get granted, but they weren't the biggest reason I was participating in the War—that would be because doing so meant Hajime would need me. It meant I was able to get closer to him, at least by a

little.

“Huh...?” I muttered to myself. I’d just returned home after buying ingredients for dinner, and I was mildly surprised to find that I had a visitor. You’d think I would’ve been more than just a little surprised that somebody had opened the lock to my apartment and let themselves inside while I was out, but when I considered the fact that the visitor in question was an entity that transcended humanity, much less locks, the shock was sorta dampened. “Leatia!”

My Spirit Handler was sitting by the table in my living room. She usually made a habit of floating around in the air, so it felt sort of weird to see her sitting politely on the ground.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Did you need something from me?”

Leatia turned to look at me. “Make me some food,” she said in a flat, disinterested voice.

“Uh. F-Food? What? Wait, do you even *eat*?” I asked.

“I *can* eat,” Leatia replied. “We don’t need nutrients or anything, though, so when we do eat, it’s just so we can enjoy the flavor. That’s all we get out of food, no matter how much of it we eat.”

Huh! I don’t get it. Spirits were a fundamentally different sort of life-form than humans, though, so I figured that trying to understand would probably be a waste of time.

“Hajime always makes your food look like it tastes incredible,” Leatia commented offhandedly.

“D-Does he really? He makes it look *that* good?”

“You could at least *try* to make it less obvious how happy you are to hear that,” she sighed.

“Okay, wait just a minute!” I said. “It’s a little early for dinner, but I’ll whip something up now.”

I’d never minded cooking. Actually, I rather liked it. I stepped into the kitchen and set about putting together an early dinner. Tonight’s dish was going to be a

vegetable stir-fry, made using a mix of leftovers from the fridge, the ingredients I'd bought today, and a seasoning mix I'd seen advertised on TV to tie it all together. I paused for a taste test—*yup, pretty good*—then microwaved some rice I'd frozen, piled it onto a plate along with the stir-fry, and poured some vegetable soup I'd made at the same time into a mug. With that, dinner was served!

"Here you go," I said as I set down a couple of place mats and our food onto the table. "One home-cooked, cost-cutting, totally unimpressive meal." I wasn't just talking myself down out of humility; it really was as basic as meals could get. But when you're in college, that's kind of just how it goes.

Leatia said a quick thanks, then dug into her food. "Hmm... Yeah, this is pretty good," she commented.

"Glad to hear it," I replied. "And, whoa...Leatia, you're really good at using chopsticks." I'd given her a pair of them without really thinking about it, but not only did she not look Japanese, she didn't even look *human*. Seeing someone like that use a pair of chopsticks so naturally struck me, in a paradoxical sort of way, as really unnatural.

"What, these things?" said Leatia, waving her chopsticks in the air. "Hajime showed me how to use them back when I met him. He was eating a convenience store lunch box, I think."

"Oh, huh," I said with a nod. Suddenly, a thought struck me. *Back when I met him*, she'd said. That meant a year ago, around the time he'd tumbled into my apartment. He and Leatia were already participating in the Spirit War at that point in time, though they'd kept it hidden from me for the next half year.

"Hey, got seconds?" Leatia asked, holding out her empty bowl.

Fast eater, huh? "Hmm... There's still a little left, but it's supposed to be Hajime's dinner," I said hesitantly.

"Oh, *his*? Why bother saving it, then? Let the jackass figure his own food out."

"I can't do that!" I said. "What if he's starving when he gets home?"

"Y'know, I've been thinking something for a while now," Leatia sighed, setting her bowl on the table and resting her chin in her hands. "You really, *reeeally*

love Hajime to pieces, huh?”

I practically jumped out of my seat, coming dangerously close to spewing a mouthful of soup all over her in the process. “Wh-Wh-What’re you talking about?! I-I don’t *love* that jerk even a little bit! No way, not at all, hate his guts!”

“Okay, but seriously,” said Leatia. “No point trying to hide it. It’s *super* obvious just watching you.”

“Ugh!”

“What, thought you could at least keep it secret from me? Sorry, but it’s clear enough that even a spirit could figure it out.”

“Ugggh!”

“Hell, to be honest, I think *everyone* in *Fallen Black* knows at this point.”

“Ugaaah?!”

Whyyyyyyyyyy?! And wait, seriously?! Everyone knows?!

“Everyone totally makes fun of you for it when you and Hajime aren’t around,” Leatia continued. “They’re all, ‘Man, Hitomi just can’t keep a secret,’ and ‘Wonder when she’s gonna ask him out,’ and ‘She’s the sort of girl who’ll waste her life on doomed romances,’ and ‘She’s *gotta* be a virgin,’ and ‘She flirts like a middle schooler,’ and so on.”

“*That’s* how they talk about me behind my back?!”

“Yeah, they pretty much *only* get along when they’re making fun of your love life.”

Boy, did I ever feel conflicted about *that* one! Considering our members were pretty much always at each other’s throats, it was really nice to hear that they actually got along sometimes...but the fact that they did so for the purpose of gossiping about our love lives was just a lot to take in. Not to mention the fact that we, the members who were in our twenties, were getting made fun of behind our backs by a bunch of teenagers.

“But, I mean, meh. Not like I care about your relationship with him. I just thought you have weird taste in guys, that’s all,” said Leatia, sparing absolutely no mercy whatsoever for me as I went through shame so unbearable I couldn’t

even look at her. “I mean, he’s a total wackjob, right? I literally don’t understand, like, eighty percent of everything he says.”

“I mean...yeah, that’s fair,” I said, unable to deny it. He’d been that way since I’d met him in high school.

“Like, I mean... Okay, I know,” said Leatia. “About a year or so ago, right? Right when I met him, I mean—when I first invited him to join the Spirit War—can you guess what he said to me?”

“Probably not,” I said. “What?” I was suddenly really curious. What *was* Hajime’s reaction when he learned about the War?

““So they’re finally upping the stakes, huh? I was just about ready to cancel the whole shebang,”” she said, not even bothering to try to imitate his voice.

“...”

“*That’s* the first thing he said after I explained the War to him. You see what I mean, right? Doesn’t make an ounce of goddamn sense, does it?”

“Nope,” I sighed. “Yeah, I have no idea what that means.”

“You wouldn’t, because it was total gibberish! And you’re taking care of a guy like that? I don’t know if I should call you devoted, or commendable, or *what*.”

“I’m not taking care of...” I began to protest, but I just couldn’t press the point because honestly, I probably *was*. Though personally, I think “getting jerked around by him” would’ve been a slightly more apt way of putting it.

I ended up not really knowing what to say and fell into silence, only for Leatia to do so as well. She closed her eyes and seemed to spend a few seconds in thought before finally saying, “So, hey. On a personal level, I actually like you a lot.”

“Whoa,” I grunted, completely taken aback. I was *not* expecting someone to open up about their feelings for me on that particular evening, least of all a girl... I mean, assuming Leatia even *was* a girl in the way I understood those things.

“You’re friendly, kind, and considerate,” she continued, “and you have good manners, even to someone who’s not human like me. You’re a good listener

too.”

“Heh heh heh,” I giggled bashfully.

“I mean, Hajime’s a little...well, *you* know what he’s like, so maybe you just look incredible since he’s my big point of comparison. But still...”

“Ha ha ha,” I chuckled awkwardly.

“But I’m a spirit, and you’re a human. Make sure you don’t forget that,” Leatia continued. “I am *not* your ally. I’m your Handler—nothing more, nothing less. I’ll tell you everything you need to know, sure, but that goes both ways—if there’s anything you *don’t* need to know, I won’t say a peep about it. I have a *mountain* of secrets I’m keeping from you, and I’ve told you plenty of white lies already. What I’m trying to say here is, well...let’s try to keep the nature of our relationship in mind, okay? Both of us.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. It sort of felt like she was giving me a warning—telling me not to open up *too* much with her. I’d thought in the past that the relationship between a Player and their Spirit Handler was like the relationship between a manga creator and their editor, and it occurred to me now that the analogy could extend to the businesslike nature of those relationships too.

In *theory*, an editor is a manga creator’s ally. They both do their best to make a good manga together, after all. That being said, an editor wouldn’t guarantee that the creators they work with won’t go hungry if their manga stops selling. Their relationship would begin and end with their work—it wouldn’t be a *friendship*, by any means. It’s a cutthroat, dog-eat-dog world out there, and if you fall behind the pack, it’s *your* fault for not being able to keep up. That, in short, is what I figured Leatia was trying to communicate to me.

Of course, the fact that she’s coming out and saying all that just goes to show how nice of a person she is... Wait, no, I shouldn’t think like that! She gave me that warning precisely because I have a tendency to be soft like this! Man. This is kinda tough.

“*That’s* something that Hajime understands really well, actually. He doesn’t trust me at *all*,” said Leatia, in a tone that said she thought that just might be for the best. The incident from the day before sprung to mind—how Hajime had

sniffed out his Spirit Handler's plot and done the exact opposite, proving himself to be ever uncontrollable.

"Huh...? Sorry, wait just a second. Yeah? This is Leatia," Leatia suddenly said, floating up into the air and turning her back to me as she started speaking with someone else entirely. The spirits would do this every once in a while—I knew she was using some sort of telepathy-esque power to speak with someone remotely. I knew that it was just one of the ways spirits communicated, but still, seeing her face the wall and talk to nobody without even holding a phone up to her ear felt downright surreal to someone from my generation, who'd grown up around cell phones.

Of course, someone who grew up in an era without phones at all might think it's surreal in the same sort of way to see my generation talking on cell phones, I thought as my mind began to wander in a really pointless direction...until suddenly, Leatia's side of the conversation pulled me back to reality.

"Wait, *what*?! What the hell are you *talking* about?! Were you even *listening* to me?!" she shouted. "What do you *mean*, 'not trustworthy'?! Don't give me that bullshit! I'm telling you, we're dealing with *System* here, and that's not—*Fuck!* Those shit-for-brains bastards hung up on me! Gaaah, why can't those geriatric jerkoffs clean the wax out of their ears and just goddamn *listen for once*?!" Leatia raged. Her hair was practically standing on end out of sheer fury.

"Wh-What happened...?" I cautiously probed.

Leatia paused to take a deep breath, then began to explain. "The Committee's finally decided how to handle the situation. They'll be calling the War to a temporary halt and rallying up all the Players to wipe out *F* as a unified force. Basically, they're trying to keep this as a Player-on-Player fight to the bitter end," she spat offhandedly.

I cocked my head. *They're bringing all the Players together as one united force?* When I'd first joined the War half a year ago, there had been about a thousand participants, and last I'd heard, that number had been cut in half, approximately. In other words, they'd be sending somewhere around five hundred Players out to grind *F* into the dust. *Surely, not even F could stand up to...but wait, no, that doesn't make sense!*

“Isn’t that sort of, you know...pointless?” I asked. “I mean, considering *System*’s power, just throwing as many people as possible at her wouldn’t help at all, right?” *Actually, it’d be worse than unhelpful—it’d be downright counterproductive!* After all, *System* was a being created for the sole and precise purpose of defeating every other Player.

“You bet it’s pointless,” groaned Leatia. “Assuming Aki was right about *System*’s power, then even if every single Player left in the War jumped her all at once, she’d turn the tables on them, no sweat.”

“But then, why would—”

“Because the higher-ups don’t *trust* Aki’s info. It’s not that they don’t trust her ability to analyze powers either—it’s that they don’t trust Natsu Aki as a person.”

“W-Wait, why? Where’s this coming from?” I asked.

“You don’t get it yet? It all boils down to the fact that *System* hasn’t actually done anything yet. She hasn’t *used* her power so far, and she hasn’t beaten a single Player.”

At that point, the pieces finally clicked together. *Of course—System hasn’t been unleashed on the War yet! She’s never seen an actual battle, and the full extent of her power’s not obvious at all. They’re probably not even convinced she exists yet!*

We only knew all about her thanks to *Head Hunting* and its ability to gather absolutely unquestionable information. We’d been spoiled on her powerset, basically. We’d gotten ahold of the copy days ahead of the story’s official release. Leatia had reported all of that to the War Management Committee, of course, but the Committee hadn’t bought our story. To them, it wasn’t verified information coming from a trusted source—in fact, it was the opposite.

“So...you *do* have faith in Aki, Leatia?” I asked. “In her power *and* in her as a person?”

“More or less,” said Leatia. “And, I mean, it’s not like she’d have any reason to lie about this.”

“Right?” I agreed.

“To tell the truth...something pretty similar to this supposedly happened back in the second Spirit War. An irregular element made its way into the mix, and they gathered up all the active Players to stop it. And, well, that’s where *this* is coming from.”

“They think that if it worked once, it’ll work again?”

“That’s about the size of it,” said Leatia with an exasperated sigh. The higher-ups were sticking to precedent like it was unquestionable dogma, and their subordinates were left to agonize over the consequences. It was like looking at human society in a microcosm.

“God,” Leatia grumbled, “imagine if Zeon had this all planned out in advance. It wouldn’t be a crazy leap of logic to assume that the Committee would go with the tried-and-true ‘gather up all the Players’ plan if you caused enough trouble, and at that point, it’d be the easiest thing in the world to have *System* wipe them all out at once. That crafty little...”

“So then, was tricking Hajime—I mean, having *Fallen Black* wipe out *F* all your plan?” I asked, suddenly remembering what Hajime had said the night before.

Leatia scowled, but a moment later, she seemed to give up and said, “Yeah, pretty much,” with a nod. “I had a feeling the bigwigs might not believe me even if I gave them the whole story. I figured the best possible outcome would be for Hajime to just wipe *F* off the map before they could turn into a real problem.” She paused, then ever so quietly mumbled, “I thought that if anyone could do something about them, it’d be him.”

For a moment, the two of us fell into silence once more. Finally, Leatia let out another sigh. “Well, no choice left. I’ll just have to go to Hajime and *ask nicely*, I guess...though I *really* don’t wanna. The Committee’ll have to inform all the Spirit Handlers about their decision, and the Handlers’ll have to pass the news onto their players after that, so I’d say we have about...two days or so, most likely? We have to do *something* about the situation before then.”

“Two days...” I repeated. “So two days from now, all the other Players will attack *F* together...”

It seemed safe to assume that some Players would choose not to participate, of course, but even if only a couple hundred took part in the operation,

System's ever-escalating sequence of asspulls would be kicked off in dramatic fashion. And Hajime would have to do something about her before then?

"B-But wait, Leatia," I said. "I know Hajime's strong, but does he really stand a chance against *System*?" I asked.

"You heard him, didn't you?" she replied. "He's got the same power she does, right?"

"What? No, that was just him being a poser! I mean—"

"I'm kidding. But anyway, if he loses, he loses," said Leatia. "I'm gonna be blunt with you: if Hajime, a Player I'm in charge of, manages to put down *F's* rebellion before it really begins, it'll look *really* good on my record. That goes both ways, though—if he flies off the handle, tries to take them on solo and loses, that mess is my responsibility."

"That sure was blunt, all right," I agreed, cringing slightly. Leatia had a pretty calculating side to her sometimes.

"Anyway," she said, "guess I should start by giving him a call." Once again, she spun around in the air to face the wall. Apparently, having a telepathic conversation while sitting face-to-face with me was somehow unpleasant in her mind. Hajime seemed to pick up his phone pretty much immediately, and Leatia gave him a rundown of everything she'd just told me. Then, the instant she was finished...

"Huh? Wait, what? You'll do it? Seriously?" Leatia said, sounding so shocked her tone came across as almost hysterical. "No...I mean, if you're okay with that, it works for me. Yeah. Great, thanks." With her telepathic conversation concluded, Leatia turned back to me. She looked a little skeptical somehow.

"What did Hajime say?" I asked.

"He said he'd do it."

"Huh? D-Do it, as in...he'll beat *F* for you?" I asked, unable to believe my ears.

Leatia nodded. "Apparently, he'll 'send them to the deepest pits of The Heavens' Hell.'"

He said his catchphrase and everything? Oh, god, he's actually serious.

“I don’t get him,” Leatia groaned. “I *seriously* just don’t get that guy! If he was gonna say yes that easily, then what the hell was the point of all that crap yesterday?”

“Good question,” I sighed. “Considering this is Hajime we’re talking about, it was probably just a matter of the mood he was in, or a whim, or something.”

“Agggh, why’d I have to end up as *his* Handler? Couldn’t he just die and get it over with?” Leatia grumbled as she slumped face-first onto the table. I knew well how stressful getting jerked around by Hajime could be, and the stress was clearly starting to build up for her.

But, anyway—Hajime’s going to go fight F? What on earth happened between yesterday and now to bring about that mood swing?

“Hey, Leatia? Did Hajime say where he is right now?” I asked as I stood up. I gathered up the plates, got them soaking in the sink, then started getting ready to head outside.

“Nah, didn’t ask...but I heard somebody say something about an order in the background, so I bet he was probably in a restaurant somewhere?”

A restaurant. Hajime had told me he was going to swing by our high school, and if he’d ended up at a restaurant near there... *Yeah, it’d have to be that one chain.*

“Sorry, Leatia,” I said as I headed for the door. “I’ll be right back!”

I sped off in my car, making my way to the restaurant. It was one of those sit-down chain joints, and one I had quite a few memories of. I tried calling Hajime several times on the way there, but he never picked up. It seemed I’d be showing up unannounced, like it or not.

Not that I’d had a super concrete reason to rush out and see him, anyway. I was just curious: Why had he gone through such a sudden and complete shift in attitude since yesterday? What could’ve possibly happened in less than twenty-four hours to make him change his mind? This was Hajime we were talking about, so I couldn’t dismiss the possibility he was just being moody or acting on a whim again—actually, the possibility of that was *really* high—but it was also possible there was more to it than that, and I just couldn’t suppress my

curiosity.

Did something happen over at Senkou High? Maybe Miss Satomi said something to him? Or maybe he ran into someone else? Someone whose presence could cause him to totally flip the script on something he'd already come to a pretty definite decision on?

All sorts of possibilities raced through my mind as I drove along...only to notice Hajime himself ambling along the sidewalk just ahead of me. I slammed on the brakes and honked a few times to get his attention. A look of surprise crossed his face as he glanced over at me, but he hopped into the passenger's seat without hesitation.

"Nice timing," said Hajime. "I was just thinking about summoning you anyway."

"Then it would've been easier on both of us if you'd picked up your phone," I grumbled.

"My bad, my bad," said Hajime, waving my complaint away. "I just had a little date with destiny, that's all."

A date with destiny? What?

"Oh, right," Hajime continued. "Speaking of, I won't need dinner tonight. Just got done stuffing myself back at the old restaurant."

"Seriously?" I sighed. "I already cooked and everything..."

"We can just have that for breakfast tomorrow."

"Right... But wait, since when did you have the money to 'stuff yourself' at a place like that?" I asked.

"Oh, no worries there," said Hajime. "I bailed before we settled the bill. Left it for the guy I was eating with to take care of."

"You *didn't*," I said, before realizing a second later that yes, of course he did. "H-Holy crap! *Hajime*! You can't just— We have to go pay him back right now!" I shouted, reaching over toward the glove box to retrieve my wallet.

Hajime, however, grabbed my wrist and held it in place. "Don't," he said. "You'll ruin the moment."

What do you mean, “the moment”? This is a question of common sense, not your weird aesthetics!

“I’ll meet up with *him* again eventually,” Hajime continued, putting a weird amount of emphasis on that one word, “but not yet. It’ll be better if we put it off for now.”

“Who is ‘he’? Just who were you eating out with?” I asked without really thinking about it.

Hajime put on one of his knowing, seemingly meaningful grins. “Guiltia Sin Jurai,” he replied.

To be honest, I can only imagine just how skeptical I looked. It was probably the same sort of expression you’d make if someone came up to you and started talking to you in a foreign language you’d never even heard of.

“A member of *Virgin Child*,” Hajime continued.

“Oooh,” I replied. Suddenly, it all made sense.

Virgin Child was the name that Hajime had given to a group made up of the current four members of Senkou High’s literary club, plus an elementary schooler who hung out with them. They were our literary club successors, basically—well, all but one of them. I had more than a few reservations about the idea of naming a group of people you weren’t part of without their permission, to be honest, but considering this was Hajime, I knew that there’d be no stopping him no matter what I said.

In any case, *Virgin Child* was *technically* a group of Players. Not just any Players either—each of their powers was incredibly potent in its own right, supposedly. The thing was, none of them were actually participating in the Spirit War. I wasn’t privy to any of the details, but from what I’d been able to gather, there were extenuating circumstances that had forced them to be isolated from the War at large. The kids were apparently special somehow.

Leatia was their Spirit Handler on paper, but not only did none of them know she existed, they didn’t even know about spirits or the Spirit War at all. The Committee had deemed them a group of irregulars, and they’d ordered Leatia to keep them away from everything else that was going on...or at least, that’s

what I'd been told. *I certainly wasn't expecting one of Virgin Child's members to not be Japanese, anyway! I mean, there's no way a Japanese person would be named, uh, Gil...? Nope, already forgot his full name.*

"So, that's why you came out here? To meet this kid?" I asked.

"Nah, I wasn't planning on meeting with him at all. I wasn't kidding before—I seriously just swung by to say hi to Miss Satomi. But then I ran into *him*," said Hajime. "Gotta say, I never dreamed that there'd be someone *that* formidable in *Virgin Child*. The Conqueror of Chaos, in whom the stygian flames of Purgatory, *Dark and Dark*, dwell! The Lord of Thanatos, the Sovereign of Sin and Damnation, the Umbral Tempest, the Bloody Darkness, King of the Cosmic Apocalyptia... He is the bearer of myriad titles and the chosen child of calamity. He's the one I've been searching for—it could be no other!"

Hajime had peppered his explanation with so many nonsensical proper nouns, I'd totally lost track of what he was saying halfway through. I sighed, and he smirked. It was a brutal, villainous smirk, yet at the same time, it spoke of a profound innocence, like the grin of a child. He just kept rambling on to himself, like he was reciting some sort of spell. I could tell that he'd completely gone into chuuni mode—not that it was hard to figure out, with his delusions firing on all cylinders like this.

It was like he'd resonated with the boy he'd met somehow, like their true selves had fed off of and amplified each other, leaving the chuuni spirit within Hajime crackling with energy. The *true* Kiryuu Hajime—Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First—had come forth for the world to see.

"S-So, Hajime," I said, doing my best to move the conversation along and drag him back into the real world. "Leatia said that you're going to fight *F*?"

"Huh? Oh, you've already heard?" said Hajime, acting as if it was the most trivial of matters. "Yeah, that's right. I'm gonna crush 'em."

"But why? You were so dead set against it the last time we talked about this! Not even Leatia *actually* thought you'd be willing to go for it!"

"But I didn't refuse."

"..."

“One of my absolute favorite things to do is to have someone ask me for something purely for the hell of it, certain that there’s no *way* I’ll agree but figuring they have nothing to lose by giving it a shot, then saying ‘sure’ to them on a whim.”

Clearly, he had no intention of giving me a serious answer.

“Bwa ha ha! I really did think this all through, though,” Hajime continued a moment later. “Part of me thought that letting *System* take out the trash and throw the power curve to hell and back again would make fighting her in the end *way* cooler. But y’know, Leatia just picked the worst time to call me about it—actually, make that the *best* time.”

“What does that mean...?” I asked.

“It means I couldn’t let *him* see me back down from a challenge, even for a moment.”



In other words, he was trying to look cool in front of that Gil-whatever kid. He was, as always—maybe even *more* so than always—dedicated body and soul to being a huge poser.

“Contact the Wings of *Fallen Black*, Hitomi,” said Hajime.

I gulped. It was finally time—time for our next battle. *An all-out war between F and Fallen Black is about to begin...* or so I thought, until Hajime blew my expectations out of the water.

“Tell all of them to stay put and do nothing. I’ll be taking on *F* alone.”

“Uh,” I grunted. “Wha... *What?* B-B-But *why?*!”

I’m pretty sure my jaw *literally* dropped. *He’s doing it alone? Running the mission single-player?* I’d been preparing myself to go into battle since I heard the news from Leatia, and now he had to spring *this* on me?!

“Oh, wait—is this part of a plan to counteract *System*’s power?” I guessed. “You mean you’ll take the front line while we support you, to keep her from awakening over and—”

“Wrong,” said Hajime, cutting me off. “I’ll go in solo to fight her like the lone wolf I am, and the rest of you are going to stay out of it. Have the others sit around in the hideout and play Monopoly or something.”

“*Monopoly...?*”

“Feels like I’ve been losing my edge lately,” said Hajime, perfectly happy to move the conversation along and leave me in the dust. “It’s all this boss-work I’ve been doing, y’know? I’ve been spending too much time keeping the organization in check. Makes me wanna get in a good single-player session.”

In what possible dimension is any of that true? You haven’t done anything even remotely boss-like! Have you forgotten how the whole team almost fell apart yesterday?

“Plus, casting off all my restraints and letting the *real* me run free every once in a while sounds pretty nice,” Hajime monologued, an ecstatic, ferocious smile spreading across his face. He wasn’t looking at me anymore—I could tell. “In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante claimed that flame burns upward in an effort to climb

back to the heavens from whence it came. Meanwhile, the deepest depths of Hell, the antithesis to Heaven, where all the Earth's gravity is concentrated into one singular point, is where the fallen angel Lucifer lies imprisoned..."

Hajime paused for a moment.

"Fire and gravity. The power of ascent, and the power of descent. Yes, I see now... These forces are indeed so perfectly opposed to each other, it's almost too much. Perhaps this, too, is but a stirring of causality—a fate predestined since the Age of the Divines!"

Hajime's mismatched eyes burned with a crazed glee. He wasn't looking at me—he was looking somewhere else. Looking at *someone* else.

Soon after, Hajime had me let him out of my car—*where* didn't seem to particularly matter to him—and went on his way. He was off to go do something in single-player mode, I guess.

We had two days until all the Players left in the war would converge upon *F* en masse. In other words, unless they were taken out of the picture either tomorrow or the day after, *System* would bring the War to an abrupt conclusion. That, in turn, meant that Hajime would have to mount his assault on *F* within that two-day span.

For a moment, I just sat there in my car, mulling over the situation. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about him...but on the other hand, for some reason, I just couldn't picture him ever actually losing. It was incredibly easy, meanwhile, to picture him crushing his foes with ease—never mind who those foes were—and smirking all the while in that same arrogant, villainous way he always did.

I, of course, had never been much of a fighter. There was only so much I could do, even at the best of times. I couldn't *stop* him—he was pretty much unstoppable—and if I'd tagged along with him, I'd probably have just ended up dragging him down. That's why I decided to just do as I was told, swing by a store to buy a board game, and head for the hideout. The rest of us could spend the next couple days playing it together. We'd have a real blast.

"So they're finally upping the stakes, huh? I was just about ready to cancel the

whole shebang.”

As I made my way to the hideout, one of Hajime’s cryptic comments suddenly sprang to mind. It was pretty clear to me that he’d been speaking in media terms. In that context, “upping the stakes” would be in reference to a technique that writers for TV shows and other sorts of media use pretty often to try to prop up an unpopular series.

When a manga or a TV show’s gradually losing its fanbase, the writers often resort to throwing in some sort of big plot twist or a dramatic shift in the story’s direction, thus upping the stakes and hopefully revitalizing interest in the series. An easy example would be the sort of manga that start out as slice-of-life gag series before suddenly shifting to centering themselves around battles and turning into action stories instead. So, what would “upping the stakes” mean for Hajime when viewed in that context? I’d told Leatia that I had no clue what he’d meant, but the truth is, I wasn’t being totally honest.

“Listen up, Hitomi: life is like a novel that you can only read once.”

Hajime had said that to me all the way back when we were in high school, and it wasn’t a onetime deal. He’d always had a habit of acting as if his life was some sort of story at every opportunity—as if every one of his experiences, as if his very *existence* was all a work of fiction. Considering that, when he talked about the stakes getting upped, it was pretty easy for me to conclude that he was talking about the stakes of his own life.

One year ago, Hajime’s ordinary life had been abruptly upended when he was pulled into a supernatural conflict. The commonplace, slice-of-life world he’d always lived in was suddenly transformed into a world of supernatural battles. A slice of life getting its stakes upped to turn it into a battle story—it was the classic example, through and through.

But what, then, had he meant when he said he was ready to *cancel* that story? The obvious interpretation seemed pretty clear there as well: to have your very life canceled would mean to die. *In other words, Hajime’s slice-of-life*

existence was so boring, he was just about prepared to—

I shook my head. That would be *nuts*. Complete insanity, through and through! And maybe I was wrong. This *was* all just wild conjecture on my part, after all. Hajime could've meant something totally different—in fact, the odds of that seemed higher than the odds that I was right! I mean, what sort of dumbass would kill themselves because their life *hadn't* suddenly turned into a supernatural battle story? At the same time, though, I couldn't help but think that it really *was* possible. Hajime was just unstable enough that I wouldn't have been able to put it past him.

Ugh...this is hopeless, I thought. Nothing had changed at all since we were in high school. The closer I got to him, the farther away Hajime drifted from me. However much I reached out for him, I'd never grasp anything other than the empty air. It was like trying to keep company with a mass of fog. He was as untouchable as the clouds up above me, but unlike them, he didn't *seem* to be far out of reach. That was the worst part: it really did *feel* like I could catch hold of him if I just reached out that last little bit farther—and whenever I would try, I'd never manage to touch him, but the effort would leave me soaked to the skin, the fog's condensation gradually seeping its way into my heart.

I'd joined this ridiculous, incomprehensible War just to get closer to him. I wasn't happy to admit it—actually, it made me downright gloomy—but I couldn't stop myself from brooding over that fact as I stepped into the bar. The moment I walked in, though, I was distracted by a sharp clink from off in a corner of the room. Somebody was inside, playing darts.

It was a boy, wearing the jacket that came as part of my old high school's uniform. He held a dart up, paused for a moment to take aim, then flung it at the board...only to miss spectacularly and send the dart thudding into the wall instead. It dropped to the ground with a quiet little *clink*.

"Good grief. This just isn't my day," said the boy. I didn't recognize him, but if I had to describe him in brief, "a pretty boy" seemed as fitting a phrase as any. He just had a certain *beauty* to his facial features, and his hair was long and tied back in a ponytail. He was also a little short for a guy, standing about as tall as I did.

“I’ve never liked doing things myself. I’m the sort of person who likes watching someone else play video games or card games more than I like playing them personally,” the boy muttered disinterestedly as he stooped down to pick up the fallen darts. Then, when he was finished, he turned toward the entryway and looked directly at me. “That’s how it works, isn’t it? Something can only *look* fun when you watch someone else do it,” he said with an amiable smile.

I went on guard in an instant. Why would there be a strange boy I’d never met *here*, of all places? Nobody outside of *Fallen Black* should’ve even known that the bar existed!

“Anyway, nice to meet you,” said the boy after a few moments of silence passed by. “Seeing as you’re *here*, I take it I can assume you’re one of Kiryuu Hajime’s friends?”

“Y-Yeah, I am,” I said cautiously. “But who are *you*? And why are you here?” There was a very real chance that he was a Player, and I held myself at the ready for him to attack at any second.

“Ha ha ha. Oh, don’t be so nervous, please! I’m just your everyday plebeian. I’m *less* than a background character! Totally powerless! Couldn’t hurt a fly!” said the boy in a flippant, joking tone. “Oh, though I suppose I *should* introduce myself,” he continued. “I’m the Thirteenth Wing of *Fallen Black: Innocent Onlooker*, or Sagami Shizumu.”

I took in a sharp breath. The Thirteenth Wing. A wing I’d never even heard of.

“No need to be distant with me, of course! Just call me Sagamin, please,” he added with a smile. Not a smirk—not even close. His expression was a gentle, unassuming, and disconcertingly natural smile, without the slightest hint of pretense to be seen.

Chapter 7: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Fifth of the Twenty-First Year

Your world bores me.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

I was so caught off guard that I honestly didn't even know what to act surprised about first, but if I had to pick out a single point about my first encounter with Sagami Shizumu that had shocked me above all else, it would have been the fact that he'd called himself the Thirteenth Wing of *Fallen Black*.

Thirteen. That was a number that carried some real weight. I mean, not for most people—*most* people would probably say something along the lines of “Thirteen? So what?”—but when we're talking about the number thirteen in relation to an organization created by Kiryuu Hajime himself, it's a completely different matter. *Worlds* different. After all—thirteen is a chuuni's absolute favorite number! It has even more condensed chuuni potential than zero!

There are all sorts of factors that give it that significance. It's considered an inauspicious or cursed number in many western countries, to start. It's also just one higher than twelve, a number that's considered incredibly important for base-sixty numerical systems; Judas was supposedly the thirteenth guest at the last supper; etcetera etcetera. Long story short, thirteen—the unlucky number—is the most chuuni number out there, without question.

And Hajime just gave it up to this guy?! Calling yourself the Thirteenth of the Twelve Wings of Fallen Black was just such a quintessentially chuuni thing to do, it was an incredible shock to learn that Hajime hadn't claimed the position for himself. Does that mean that this pretty boy's just that important from Hajime's perspective?

“Kiryuu and I are, well...I guess most people would call us childhood friends,”

said Sagami. “Of course, a same-sex childhood friend’s worth less than garbage in my book. His mother helped me out way back whenever, anyway.”

By that point, it was pretty clear to me that he was an acquaintance of Hajime’s, so I figured I should probably treat him as a guest and offer some hospitality. I brought out some drinks and snacks to serve to him, then sat down on the couch and briefly introduced myself.

“Umm,” said Sagami when I was finished. “I’m incredibly sorry to ask a woman like yourself a question like this, but if you wouldn’t mind, would you perhaps tell me how old you are? I mean, it’s always easier to talk with someone when you know their age, right? I’m sixteen, by the way, turning seventeen later this year.”

He certainly took care to ask the question politely, at least. I hadn’t planned on hiding or lying about my age to begin with, so I didn’t even hesitate before answering. “I’m twenty-two right now,” I said.

“What, a hag? Screw that.”

“Uh?”

“Oh, nothing! Twenty-two, you said? I *thought* you seemed awfully adultlike! It’s enough to make a youngster like me a little nervous!”

W-Weird...I could’ve sworn he said something incredibly rude for a second there.

I had some pretty serious doubts, but Sagami moved the conversation along before I could voice them. “Kiryuu’s gotten me up to speed on the Spirit War and the powers and all that, by the way, but I’m not actually a Player myself,” he said.

“Huh?” I blinked. “Wait, but didn’t you call yourself by a power name a second ago? What was *that*, then?”

“Oh! That was Kiryuu’s doing. He came up with a name for a power I haven’t even awakened to, and he wouldn’t take no for an answer,” said Sagami. “I’m not participating in the War at all. Oh, but I *have* met Leatia once! Though really, it was more like Kiryuu forced me to meet her.”

“Oh, is that so?” I replied.

“She hasn’t shown up even once for me since then, though. Girl’s got a real stubborn streak. I wonder...did shouting ‘Hell yeah, monster girl time!’ in her face offend her or something? That might explain it.”

“Oh. Is that so,” I replied, somehow even less enthusiastically than before. Hajime had told me way back whenever about how somebody he knew had gotten super hyped about meeting Leatia, and it seemed I’d finally learned who that somebody was.

“Speaking of which, Leatia can make herself invisible whenever she wants, right?” asked Sagami.

“Right,” I said. “Well, I think it’d be more technically accurate to say that she can make herself *visible* whenever she wants.”

“In other words, it’s not out of the question that she’s here at this very moment and we just can’t see her.”

“Well, I mean...I guess I can’t rule it out?”

“In *other* words, it’s not out of the question that she’s here, invisible, right in front of me, in the nude.”

“Technically, no, but I have *no* clue why she’d be wandering around naked.”

At that point, Sagami closed his eyes, held his hands out before him, and started flexing his fingers as if he were squeezing something. “I’m groping Leatia’s tits. I’m groping Leatia’s tits. I’m groping Leatia’s tits,” he quietly chanted to himself. It was kind of remarkable—I’d never seen somebody look that serious about something *that* creepy. He had the same sort of intensity and presence as an ascetic monk meditating under a freezing-cold waterfall.

Yikes. Okay, how do I handle this? The kid was *really* grossing me out, and I was at a bit of a loss for how to deal with the little creeper.

“Oh, my apologies. I lost control of myself for a moment,” said Sagami, quickly trying to smooth things over. He must’ve noticed how repulsed I was by his behavior.

“So...” I said, “what *are* you here for, Sagami?”

“Circumstances required me to pay this place a visit,” he explained. “Kiryuu told me that I should never, ever come here, but I just *had* to... I couldn’t stop myself.”

“‘Circumstances’...?” I repeated. *Circumstances important enough that someone like him—the secret Thirteenth Wing—was forced to reveal himself? Just what on earth—*

“A little bird told me that a middle school girl had an accident on the floor here. I could *not* pass that up.”

“...”

Oh god. Yeah. No. This kid’s a genuine freak. He was young, hot, and looked like he’d probably be a real hit with the girls his age...but personalitywise, he was *far* past saving.

“O-Oooh? And just who told you a thing like that? Whoever they are, they’ve been making up some really weird lies,” I said, doing my best to keep my composure. I did my damndest to deny everything, mostly for the sake of Fan’s dignity. Akutagawa had repaired the wall that Hajime had damaged, by the way—well, more like he’d remade it—and I’d helped Fan clean the floor. *If I just keep the act up, then this passing pervert will give up and go home none the wiser...or so I thought.*

“Oh, no need to put on a front for your friend’s sake,” said Sagami. “I’ve actually already accomplished my objective here anyway.”

“Huh?”

“The very first thing I noticed when I stepped into this room was the smell of disinfectant, and the second I smelled that, I recategorized that story from ‘rumor’ to ‘proven fact’ in my mental filing system. It was very easy to guess that someone had tried to deodorize the room to cover up a certain someone’s incontinence, and the rest was simplicity itself: I just had to find the place in the room where the disinfectant’s smell was strongest. That would be the place where it was directly applied—in other words, the place where the ‘accident’ happened.”

Wow! Hearing him break this down so calmly and rationally is so viscerally

disgusting, I can barely even stand it! There is nothing about him that isn't repulsive!

I was cringing away from Sagami so violently, I almost wound up *behind* the couch I was sitting on. For just a moment, I wondered what he'd done when he'd found the spot in question, but I very quickly resolved myself to never, *ever* ask. *Nothing* good could come out of knowing the answer. If he told me he'd pulled a "this is the taste of someone who's lying" on it, I was absolutely confident I'd find myself sprinting out of the building in no time flat without even having bothered to put my shoes on first. *I just hope Fan makes it out of this all right. If she ever learns about any of this, she might actually contemplate suicide!*

"Well, anyway, that's what I was here for," said Sagami. "What about you, though, Miss Saitou? What brings you here?"

"I...just came by to drop that off," I said, gesturing toward the bag with the board game in it, which I'd set on the couch beside me.

Sagami gave it a somewhat mystified glance. "Do the members of this organization have a thing for that sort of game?" he asked.

"Ah, umm. There's an explanation here, but it's kind of complicated... Where to even start...?" I muttered. Sagami wasn't a Player, so I had a feeling that it might be for the best to not tell him anything about *F*. I decided to keep my explanation to the broad strokes of the situation and explained that Hajime had gone off to fight someone purported to be the strongest participant in the War.

"Hmm," said Sagami when I finished. "Single-player, huh? I see how it is. Turning something like that into a challenge run and restricting his playstyle's just like Kiryuu. Personally, if I'm going to *restrict* anything, I'd rather ropes and a bed were involved, but that's neither here nor there. The point is that he said all that to you, and then you went out and bought a copy of Monopoly, just like he asked you to..."

Sagami paused for a moment and took a long, hard look at me, his gaze cold and analytical.

"It sort of feels like you're completely obedient to him, aren't you?"

Now it was my turn to hesitate. “*Huh?*”

“I could say that you’re a good caretaker, or that you’re very agreeable, I suppose. That would make it sound better, sure...but the truth of the matter is that all you’ve been doing is kissing his ass. Don’t you think?”

“K-Kissing his *ass*?!”

I’d shot halfway to my feet before I knew it, and I just barely managed to slam on the brakes and sit back down again. *Calm down! Calm down! If you let your emotions run wild here, you’ll make it look like he hit you where it hurts! The more you deny it, the worse it’ll look for you!*

“Saitou Hitomi,” Sagami said thoughtfully. “I remember you now. Kiryuu’s brought you up a few times before. You’ve been with him since high school, right?”

“That’s right,” I cautiously answered. Learning that Hajime had been talking about me was a little worrying. *Knowing him, he probably griped about how worthless I was, or whined about how I nagged him so much it was like I was his mom, or something.*

“He says it a lot, actually: ‘Hitomi’s the best girl I could ask for.’”

I let out a strangled gasp. It felt like my head had been replaced with a boiling kettle. My cheeks were *aflame*. *No way! No way! That’s how Hajime talks about me when I’m not around?! He usually treats me like an afterthought in person, so I figured he’d probably talk crap about me behind my back! “The best girl he could ask for”...? Heh. Heh heh heh heh heh.*

“Well, I can tell that *you’re* pleased as punch about that,” said Sagami with a slight but noticeable wince.

Whoops! Now I had *him* treating *me* like I was some sort of freak. I quickly stiffened up my facial muscles and brought my expression back under control...or I tried to, anyway, but I just couldn’t help but grin. I mean, come on —“the best girl he could ask for”? *Heh heh heh!*

“‘A good girl.’ Most people would think that’s a compliment, but I wonder—what does Kiryuu *really* mean when he says it?” said Sagami with a sarcastic smile as he watched me fail to control myself. “This is just my personal opinion,

of course...but the way I see it, when people say that sort of thing about someone, they *usually* mean that someone's a doormat."

"A doormat?" I repeated, caught by surprise once again.

"Why does everyone love *good* people? The answer's simple: because having a good person around is convenient. The kinder and more broad-minded a person is, the less likely they are to ignore someone in need, and the more likely they are to go along with any request without protest. People like *that* are fantastic to have around—after all, you can walk all over them. *That's* why good people are considered so valuable and why we lavish them with praise. The more we do that, the more good people there'll be around us, and the more we can take advantage of them."

"That...seems like a really cynical way of looking at things," I said. At the same time, it occurred to me that Hajime had told me something quite similar.

He'd gone on a rant about how when people gripe and moan about how you have to grow up, what they *mean* by it is that you have to turn yourself into a convenient little pawn of society. The world at large doesn't *want* you to think about your place in it, let alone your place in the wider universe. It doesn't *want* you to ask questions like "What is my purpose?" or "Why is it wrong to kill people?" No, the world at large just wants you to *grow up* and work yourself to the bone for the sake of society—to turn yourself into a convenient stepping-stone for total strangers. *That*, according to Hajime, was why society valued "growing up" so highly. Because it made it easier to walk all over you.

Of course, in *my* mind, that was the sort of perspective on society that only a hardcore chuuni edgelord could ever assert with a straight face. All *I* could think while he gave me that whole spiel was, *Stop making excuses for yourself and go get a job!*

"It may be cynical," said Sagami, "but you can't deny that it's true, can you?"

"So, what—that's where you've been going with all this?" I said as the indignation I was feeling started to creep its way into my tone. "This whole time, you were just building up to calling me Hajime's doormat?"

"Can't deny it," Sagami readily admitted. "I'd prefer if you didn't misunderstand me, though: I'm not trying to bad-mouth you! I'm actually

worried about you, if anything. Let me ask you something, Hitomi: could you, being Kiryuu Hajime's doormat of a good girl, bring yourself to turn against him?"

"What's *that* supposed to mean...?"

"Are you familiar with the term 'iconoclast'?" Sagami said, carrying on calmly with no regard for how shaken I was. "Let's start with the 'Messiah complex'—that's a pretty famous one. It refers to the compulsive desire to be a messiah, a savior. It describes people who simply can't stand to *not* help others."

I'd heard the phrase before. From what I'd understood, when people said someone has a messiah complex, they usually just meant that they're obsessed with helping other people. That might *sound* like a good thing at a glance, but when it went so far that they started structuring their own self-worth around the desire to help people, it could turn into a form of weakness in its own right.

"The iconoclast is more or less the opposite," Sagami continued. "*That* term refers to people who just can't help but rebel against the world at large. *They* live to challenge the established order and to blaspheme the sacred cows. Nothing makes them happier than finding something that society considers a given and tearing it apart with cutting criticism. People like that find their meaning in baring their fangs at the world, and they can't find it in any other way."

The way he described the concept of an iconoclast, I could only think of it as the high end of chuunibyou—a chuuni's final and most refined form; the ultimate destination for those not chosen by the world we live in, and the place where those who have nowhere to go eventually find themselves.

At that point, Sagami paused to smile faintly at me.

"And you're saying that's what Hajime is?" I eventually asked.

"That's right," said Sagami. "That's how *I* read him, in any case. I'm quite certain...that he was *not* chosen by this world. Thus, he was afflicted with the pathological need to become a chosen one—and of course, that's what makes him so much fun to watch," he added with a chuckle. "And so Kiryuu Hajime—or rather, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First—does not desire a meek, obedient pawn as his subordinate. Needless to say, he doesn't desire a doormat either. He

desires conflict after conflict, rebellion after rebellion... Essentially, all he wants is a place and a partner that will let him indulge his wildest chuuni fantasies.”

I thought back to a few hours beforehand, when I’d spoken with Hajime in my car. To how it had felt like I wasn’t even there for him—like he was looking at someone else the whole time.

“All that said, of course, I frankly couldn’t possibly give less of a crap about your and his love lives. I’ve got absolutely no interest in a rom-com starring a bunch of twenty-somethings,” Sagami sighed. He drained the rest of the drink I’d served him, set his cup down on the table, and stood up. “Thanks for the warm welcome. I’ll be on my way now.”

“W-Wait!” I shouted, jumping up from the couch as he walked briskly away. “I-I know this might be a really blunt question, but...h-h-how do I I-look to you?” I asked, only to ask *myself* what the hell I was doing a second later. The question had come to mind so naturally, though, that I just couldn’t stop it from slipping out.

A doormat, he’d called me. It was frustrating to hear everything I’d done up to now described in those terms, and it was even more frustrating that I couldn’t bring myself to argue against it. My self-confidence had been ground to pieces, and all sorts of doubts about myself and my womanhood were beginning to weigh heavily upon me.

“Err...what do you mean by that?” asked Sagami.

“I mean h-how do I look, as a woman? A-Am I cute? Or pretty? I just want your personal opinion, that’s all.”

I know this will make me sound conceited, but I’d always thought I was decent-looking. I’d put a lot of effort into maintaining my figure as well. I had a pretty huge chip on my shoulder about my eye, sure, but if you turned a blind eye to that one little problem (for the record, I regretted that joke the second it came to mind), I honestly thought that I had a lot going for me.

“Let me think,” said Sagami. “You said you were twenty-two years old, didn’t you?”

“R-Right,” I replied. *It’s fine. Twenty-two’s still plenty young, and besides,*

people always tell me I look young for my age! I get carded every single time I try to buy myself a drink!

“Hmm. Well, this is nothing more than my own subjective opinion...but the way I see it...”

I gulped, waiting for Sagami to finish his thought. Finally, he put on an awkward smile and put his viewpoint out there, plain as could be.

“...you’re disqualified.”

“...”

I heard something *snap* inside of me.

“Disqualified, disgusting, and dispiriting. The three D’s. Hah! Good one, me.”

“.....”

His impression of me, pure and undiluted, cut me down like an executioner’s axe. In that moment, every ounce of pride and confidence I’d had in myself was torn up by the root and chucked into an incinerator.

A few hours later, the remaining members of *Fallen Black* all gathered in our hideout. “The remaining members,” of course, meaning everyone except for Kiryuu Hajime and Sagami Shizumu. The First through Fifth wings were all together, while the Zeroth and Thirteenth were absent.

“Okay, Tomi, what’s the deal? Why’d we all have to get together out of nowhere like this?” Aki asked in a listless drone as she fiddled with her smartphone. “I thought we were basically out of the picture at this point? The Committee didn’t take me seriously, and Ryuu *never* listens, I swear... Ugggh, I’ve *totally* lost my drive after all this crap.”

“K-Kiryuu went off to battle *F* on his own, didn’t he...?” said Fan, still wearing her nurse’s outfit and sitting next to Aki. “Leatia told us all about it. Why does he never, ever try to cooperate with us?”

“Look, Hitomi, I’m gonna put this out on the table in advance: if you’re about to ask us to go save his ass, the answer’s no,” said Toki. He was sitting on the couch, his feet propped up on the table before him in a display of truly appalling manners. “If he wants to launch a suicide strike on ’em, then I say let him. And if

he gets himself killed, well, that's his own damn fault. I'm not about to play along with each and every lunatic scheme that pops into that nutjob's head."

"Agreed," said Akutagawa, who was off in a corner, eyes glued to a handheld game console. "I guess if Kiryuu loses, that means it's over for *Fallen Black* and the Spirit War on the whole. Not like anyone can beat *System*," he droned, sounding for all the world like he couldn't have cared less. He wasn't interested in the Spirit War, or in Hajime, or in *any* of this, for that matter.

"You *did* have something to say to us, though, right?" said Toki. "Think you could hurry it up?"

"Yeah, seconded! What's this all about, Tomi?" added Aki.

"Right. Sure, I'll tell you," I said, answering their urging with a nod. First, though, I strode over to the corner where Akutagawa was standing, headphones placed firmly over his ears as always. "Hey, Akutagawa? This is really important, so do you think you could take your headphones off while we talk?"

"*Huh?*" grunted Akutagawa, giving me a look.

"Take them off," I repeated.

Akutagawa sighed. "I've said this a *million* times...I have the volume turned down, so I can hear you just fine," he mumbled in an exasperated, condescending tone. "Besides, it's not like whether or not I'm wearing headphones is going to change the course of the conversation. What does it even matter? Me wearing headphones isn't going to cause us any problems, is it?"

"I don't care," I said. "Just take them off. It's common courtesy."

"Common courtesy, huh?" huffed Akutagawa. "What makes it *common*, anyway? Far as I can tell, everyone has their own definition of 'common courtesy,' and they're all *different*," he began. He was obviously starting off on another one of his awful, nitpicky rambles, but no. Not this time. I reached over, grabbed his headphones, yanked them off his head, and hurled them across the room. Their cable popped out of his console, whipping through the air behind them.

Akutagawa gaped at me. “*Huh?* What do you think you’re—”

“I said take off the *fucking* headphones!”

I screamed with everything I had. I could feel all the limiters inside me vanish—my compulsion to maintain my human relationships, my own nonconfrontational personality, my instinct to go with the flow and not rock the boat—all of them, gone.

“I am *sick* to *goddamn death* of your stupid, quibbling, nitpicky *shit*, Akutagawa! When somebody’s talking to you, you *take off your headphones*! It’s common etiquette, so have some *manners* already! Spare just *one* thought for how the people you’re talking to feel!”

Akutagawa looked absolutely gobsmacked—and not just him. *Everyone* in the room was looking at me with pure, deer-in-the-headlights astonishment all over their faces. My sudden transformation must’ve caught them off guard, but I sure didn’t give a damn! I wasn’t even *close* to finished venting all my rage yet!

“*Whoa*, Tomi...what’s wrong? What’re you flipping out for?” Aki timidly asked.

I rounded on her next. “And *you*—have some goddamn *respect* for once!” I roared. “Who the hell taught you that you could say *whatever* the hell you want to just *anyone*, any time?! What, you think you can just get away with being rude because it’s your *thing*, or something?! You’re supposed to be *polite* when you talk to your elders! Japan has a *goddamn hierarchical society*, girl!”

“Eep! J-Jeez, my ba—”

“*Polite!*”

“I-I’m sorry!”

I wasn’t done yet, though. I moved on to my next target: Fan. “And *you!* Nurse Piss!”

“N-Nurse *Piss?!?*” Fan squealed.

“You... *You...*” I paused. “You’re basically fine, actually.”

“Basically fine?! You’re just giving me a super mean nickname and moving on for no reason?!”

Honestly, I couldn’t really think of anything I wanted Fan to improve about her behavior. And yes, calling her “Nurse Piss” *had* put her on the verge of tears, but I was way too furious to feel the slightest hint of guilt about that in the moment. My anger was roiling within me like a sea of magma.

“Aggh, I can’t *take* this anymore! Each and every one of you people piss me off *so damn much!*” I shouted. I had *snapped*. It was just like the time in high school when I’d treated a certain dumbass to a jumping knee to the solar plexus: one moment I was fine, and the next, I’d completely lost it. My blood was running terrifyingly cold—a burning cold, like I was packed up in a box full of dry ice.

But y’know what?! I think *anyone* would snap if they had to put up with all the nonsense I’d been dealing with! Hajime was always feeding me his cryptic bullshit! Our team was full of pedantic brats who all looked down on me, all the time! The group itself was *barely* holding together and *never* got along! The organization we were up against was so hilariously, unfairly overpowered they might as well have been invincible! And above all else, *Kiryuu friggin’ Hajime* was always feeding me his *cryptic bullshit!*

Nothing had gone right for me recently! Why did I have to make like a petty corporation’s middle manager and rack my mind solving all these problems on my own?! And to top it all off, what the *hell* was that stupid little Sagami Shizumu freak’s problem?! “*Disqualified*”?! *What does that even mean?! He can take all three of his D’s and shove them right up his ass!*

“Every last goddamn one of you...*stop looking down on me!*”

“H-Hey, what’s wrong with you, Hitomi? This isn’t like you at all,” said Toki.

“Shut your trap!” I snapped. “‘Not like’ me? Well, what the hell *is* like me?! Is it *like me* to just stand there and smile while a bunch of brats condescend to me?! And don’t think *you’re* getting off easy here, *Toki Shuugo!* You piss me off just as much as the rest of them!”

“H-Huh? What did *I* ever do to you?”

“Remember what you said the other day?! That I’m the only one here who listens, and that the girls just shout all the time, Kiryuu spouts gibberish, and Akutagawa might as well be mute?”

“I mean, yeah, I said that...but how’s that a problem?”

“Why aren’t I one of the girls?!”

Toki looked dumbfounded, but his confusion wasn’t nearly enough to stop me. *That really bothered me, you know?! It’s been bothering me this whole time! I’ve been holding a grudge this whole time!*

“I belong in the ‘girls’ category too! I’m only twenty-two, and anyway, girls are girls no matter how old they are!” I bellowed with all my heart and soul.

Everyone else was just...frozen. An almost unbearable tension and pressure dominated the bar as I panted for breath.

“All members of *Fallen Black*—listen up!” I shouted. I didn’t care a whit about the tension in the air! “We have a new objective: we’re going to go out and crush *F*!”

That declaration certainly shook things up. Instantly, the other members began to stir restlessly.

“Wha... H-Hold up a sec—ah, I mean, please wait a moment, Tomi...err, Miss Tomi,” said Aki. “You mean you want us to help Ryuu out after all?”

“*Hell* no!” I shouted. “That dumbass can get bent! We’re taking *F* down *before* Kiryuu Hajime can get his hands on them! If he wants to do this single-player like a poser, that means he doesn’t get to complain when *we* do everything before he gets the chance! Plus—and this is the most important part of all...”

Hajime’s orders had been bluntly specific: don’t do anything. *But who gives a crap! If you’re gonna run off and do whatever the hell you want, then so am I!*

“...doesn’t he just *piss you off*?! Kiryuu Hajime, a certifiable chuuni edgelord, thinks *we’re* not worth his time! And even if you’re not pissed at him, well, *I* am! You’d better *believe* I’m pissed! *He* thinks this whole organization’s just a big game of make-believe! He’s never thought about *anyone* other than himself, from start to finish! You could interview every deadbeat boss in the world, and

you wouldn't find *one* as bad at their job as he is!"

I slammed my fist into the wall in a fit of pure rage. A dull thud rang out, but I barely even felt the pain. A heat was building up in the corners of my eyes. The emotions surging through me were so powerful they had me completely under their control, from head to toe, overriding my better judgment. For all their power, though, the feeling that had taken hold of me was so complicated and conflicting that I couldn't even tell where it was all coming from. Was I happy, or sad? Jealous, or indignant? Or maybe it was simpler than that—maybe I was just plain old in love.

One thing was for sure, though: I was purely and uncontrollably pissed at Kiryuu Hajime. *I'm pissed! I'm so, so, so pissed! Why?! Why, why, why?!*

Why does that stupid man never, ever pay attention to me?!

"It's time for a revolution! I'm not gonna rebel—I'm gonna *revolt*! As for you people, you can just shut up and do as I say! We're giving that cryptic-ass chuuni son of a bitch a taste of cold hard reality! We're gonna make him look like the clown that he is!"

Fine. I get it now. I'll never get him to look my way if I keep playing the doormat. Kiryuu Hajime will never give me the time of day that way. He considers his enemies to be a higher priority than his allies, and he doesn't even try to hide it. He only thinks about who he'll fight against, not who'll fight by his side.

So fine! Let him be that way! I just have to become his enemy myself! I'll force my way into the stupid little dreamland he lives in and make him see me for the girl I am! I'll carve the name Saitou Hitomi into the deepest reaches of his soul—so deep he'll never forget about me ever again! I'll make such an impression on him he won't be able to tear his eyes away from me!

"On your feet, people! It's time for *Fallen Black* to spread its wings!"

All right, Kiryuu Hajime—no, Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First. As of tonight, the jet-black wings that you assembled will be carrying me into battle! I'll tear that fallen angel's wings right off you, shred you into mincemeat, and send you

straight to the deepest pits of the Heavens' Hell!

“Fight by my side! Stab that dumbass in the back and follow *my* orders instead! We’ll beat *F* and *System* before you know it, and then when *Kiryuu Hajime* shows up, we’ll tell him the show’s already over and he didn’t get a part! And then we’ll laugh our *asses* off at him!”

It was no surprise that everyone seemed hesitant when their organization’s second-in-command had proposed an unambiguous betrayal of their leader. Past that, though, the similarities between each member’s reaction faded. They looked scared, shaken, worried, full of doubts—each of them was handling the situation in their own ways. Clearly, all of them had very different feelings about my proposal.

“This is bullshit,” a voice finally rang out, cutting through the silence. Toki finally took his feet off the table and shot me a dangerously pointed glare. “What do we have to gain by one-upping that guy other than a cheap thrill? That’s how *toddlers* get revenge. It’s totally pointless.”

Toki’s gaze was as sharp as a knife’s edge, and for a second, I flinched backward. In terms of pure combat potential, he was the second-most powerful member of our organization. When Hajime said that Toki was the last person he wanted to fight, he hadn’t *just* been kidding around. If this were any other day, I probably would’ve jumped halfway out of my skin and broken eye contact...but not today. Today, I gritted my teeth and stared back at him unblinkingly—a piercing, one-eyed stare.

Toki snorted derisively, stood up from the couch, and walked over to me, one hand tucked away in his pocket. “But, y’know, he’s *also* such a pain in the ass, I’d take a toddler’s revenge over nothing. Nothing wrong with a cheap thrill or two every now and then,” he said, mouth curling into a cocky grin. “You’re a hell of a lot more cut out to give orders than *that* dipshit’ll ever be, Hitomi.”

“Tell me about it,” said Aki as she hopped off her seat. “Ryuu’s been going *way* too far lately! And, like, he doesn’t *have* to treat us like trash, right? Dude spends all his time running away from the real world—he doesn’t even have a job anymore! Giving him a taste of reality sounds good to me!”

“I-I’d like to get back at Kiryuu too,” Fan added. “I’m just as fed up with him as

all of you are! Actually, at this point, *all* of the me's inside me are shouting about how we need to teach him a lesson."

The final remaining member, Akutagawa, let out a sigh of resignation. "Right, okay, I see the way the wind's blowing. And now that it's come to this...I mean, whatever, I guess... I might as well side with you for now, Hitomi."

Zigzag Jigsaw: a power of laceration and assassination. *Head Hunting*: a power that analyzes powers. *Sex Eclipse*: a power of fragmented identities. *Dead Space*: a power that puts the spaces between to work. Four powers—four Players—four *Wings* had come together to follow my command.

"Thank you, everyone," I said, my resolve growing stronger still. "It's time for a betrayal!"

You see things like this every once in a while if you look back throughout history—doormats like me getting fed up and double-crossing the people who walk all over them for deeply personal reasons. The fallen angel who'd once raised a rebellion against God was about to have a rebellion of his own on his hands.

My name is Saitou Hitomi. I'm twenty-two years old. A fourth year in college. My Blood type's A. My sign's Aries. I'm the First Wing of Fallen Black: the organization's second-in-command and most senior flunkie. I'm the wielder of Eternal Wink, a power of visual violation. My first love is Kiryuu Hajime. And...

"...I'm gonna give that asshole the evil eye of a lifetime!"

Chapter 8: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Sixth of the Twenty-First Year

All that separates strength and weakness is a veneer of falsehood.

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

System: a power of unlimited asspulls. A power that can prevail over any other, without exception. No matter how mighty its wielder's foe may be—no matter how vicious they may be—*System* copes. It adapts. It acclimates. It exceeds. It rises to meet every challenge...and awakens in response. Like the powers of a true protagonist. Like a real-life deus ex machina.

The powers that we Players wielded had been granted to us by the spirits, and I'd been told that they had—to some extent, anyway—been tuned and adjusted relative to each other. The Spirit War, after all, had been set up for the purpose of gambling, and throwing a balance-breaking power into the game would totally defeat that purpose. To put it simply: it shouldn't have been possible for one Player to reign dominant by nature above all the others. Gambling is only gambling if there's a chance to win or lose it all. It's all about the *risk*, and if the outcome's already been decided, you can't really call it a gamble in the first place.

System, however, had been created by *F* for the express purpose of drawing a line in the sand between her and the other Players. Zeon had brought *System* into being as an act of treason—to voice his (or her, I suppose—I wasn't actually totally sure) objections to the Spirit War, and ultimately, to bring it to an end. *System* was intended to overcome each and every ability that could be thrown at her. Her power had been made to be absolute and undefeatable.

So, the big question: how could we defeat her in spite of that? And the answer: we couldn't. Victory was simply not on the table. Well, it was far beyond *me*, at the very least. All that being said, we didn't necessarily *have* to

beat her. After all, our goal was to *stop* her.

“Hitomi! Duck!” shouted Toki.

I moved completely on reflex, hitting the deck in an instant, my hands pressed to the parking lot’s asphalt. A moment later, *something* shot through the air at an incredible speed, directly over my head. It looked like a metal pipe of some sort, twisted into a bizarre shape. By the time I’d stood up again, it was already over. I turned my eye back to Toki just in time to see him deliver a savage kick to the abdomen of the man he was fighting, who flew backward, tumbled for several meters across the ground, then emptied his stomach. He writhed for a moment, unable to stand, and finally came to a stop. He probably wasn’t *dead*, but he was unmistakably out of the fight.

“Let’s keep moving,” said Toki, his voice gruff and businesslike. Blood dripped down his cheek. The man he was fighting had transformed the pipe into a sort of sickle that he’d swung about on a chain at one point in their fight, and he’d just barely managed to scratch Toki’s face. His power, apparently, had allowed him to change the shape and structure of metal, State-Alchemist-style. He’d shifted his weapon’s form several times over the course of the fight, and I had to admit, it *was* a scarily effective power in combat...but unfortunately for him, Aki had already analyzed his power the last time we were here. She’d shared all the information she’d gathered back then with the rest of us, and a power like that was nothing to Toki if he knew its innermost workings in advance.

“Sounds good,” I said. “I think it’s time for us to *really* get their attention.”

Toki led the way, and the two of us rushed into the factory proper. We didn’t bother checking if the enemies we brought down were alive, and we didn’t take the time to finish them off either. *They* weren’t our highest priority.

Fallen Black had split up into three teams, each of which had infiltrated *F*’s secret base, the Yuzuhara food processing plant, independently. Toki and I were Team A, Akutagawa and Aki were Team B, and Fan was on her own. Teams A and B were primarily tasked with distracting and misleading the enemy. We’d go in, raise hell, and get *F*’s attention. Akutagawa and Aki had started their assault from the other side of the compound, and I had a feeling that they were most likely on a rampage at that precise moment. While the enemy’s eyes were

firmly upon us, Fan would slip in, taking advantage of the chaos to make her way deep into the center of their operation. She had to go in alone, unfortunately, but she was effectively several people in and of herself, so I figured she'd be fine.

"Do you think Team B's doing okay?" I asked as we sped through the factory, tracking dirt all over the blueish-white linoleum floors.

"Yeah, they'll be fine," said Toki. "Natsu can pick out any enemy's weakness, and assuming Akutagawa is actually lifting a finger for once, there aren't many folks out there who could take him on."

"Oh? You've got a pretty high opinion of him, huh?"

"I'm just being honest," Toki spat. "I can't stand the little shit, but he's a cut above most Players."

Dead Space gave Akutagawa the power to manipulate gaps. To be clear, I don't mean he had the ability to alter gaps that were already there—no, he had the power to bring them into being. Akutagawa Yanagi could create any sort of gap conceivable, at will. He could generate a room in the space between two other rooms, open a new path between two roads, and even create space itself within space that already existed. Be it a joint, a crack, a tear, a seam, a chasm, or a crease, he could use his power to generate a gap within anything even esoterically line-like, forcing it open and building a world of his choosing in between.

The true essence of his power could be seen when he used it for the sake of defense. He could conjure up a fantastical, mind-bending equivalent of a shield that would prevent any and all attacks from touching him. Even *Lucifer's Strike*, a power that Hajime regularly boasted was the most destructive ability around, would find it next to impossible to penetrate Akutagawa's defenses (though Hajime, of course, claimed that he could do so easily).

"By the way, Hitomi—has Fantasia checked in yet?" Toki asked.

"No, not yet... Wait, never mind, that's probably her," I replied, then stopped to pull out my phone and check the text I'd just received.

"Any luck?"

“None,” I sighed. “She said she couldn’t find anything that would let us control *System*. I wonder if they already destroyed all the data and documents about her?”

“Guess that means we’ll just have to tie someone up and get the info straight from the horse’s mouth,” said Toki.

“Looks like it,” I agreed.

Specifically, Fan’s mission had been to slip inside the enemy base while we wrecked the place up and look for anything that could let us control *System* ourselves. That long-haired girl we’d seen floating in a test tube had the power to defeat any and all comers, and we knew perfectly well that we couldn’t beat her...so our goal was to ensure we’d never *have* to. If you can’t beat them, then don’t fight them at all! The last time we saw her, she was fast asleep, and we figured we could just make sure she stayed that way.

At the moment, *System* was under *F*’s control, and she had yet to be unleashed upon the world. Her power—the ultimate power—hadn’t been activated so much as once yet. We weren’t totally sure if she was still in development or if she was undergoing maintenance, but the point was that as things stood, she was in a dormant state. That led to the logical conclusion that *F* had the capability to put her in such a state, and *that* meant that all we had to do was steal that capability from them.

It had taken a lot of thought, but the plan really did seem like it would allow us to take her out of the picture. She had a shonen manga protagonist’s power to come out ahead in any battle, but if you didn’t want to deal with a cheater like her, all you had to do was make sure her series got canceled at the first serialization meeting it was brought to. She’d never see the light of day to begin with, and her plot arc would be shelved for all eternity.

“I’m sure Hajime would veto a plan like this without a second thought,” I muttered. I sounded almost ashamed of myself, and really, I knew that what we were trying to do—to beat her without ever even fighting her—was as cowardly as could be. The RPG equivalent would be beating the game by making sure the final boss had never been awakened in the first place. There’d be nothing *fun* about an ending like that at all—it’d be a story without a climax. A guy like

Hajime, who prioritized the fun of supernatural battles above all else, would never approve.

“I dunno how to put this, but, y’know...it’s like you’re always thinking about Kiryuu—and I mean, like, twenty-four seven,” said Toki with a roll of his eyes. “But anyway, isn’t that a good thing? The fact that he’d never go for a plan like this is what makes it meaningful for you to choose it, right?”

“You know what...? Yeah. You’re right. Thanks,” I replied.

“Don’t mention it. Seriously,” Toki grunted gruffly.

“I’ve always known that you’re actually a really nice guy deep down, Toki.”

“And that just goes to show that *you’re* naive as all get-out,” said Toki. I wasn’t totally sure if he was just being bashful or if he was actually fed up with me. His expression looked more uninterested than anything else.

“There they are!”

A shout rang out from down the hall. I turned to look and found a cluster of *F*’s goons charging toward us. There were eight of them, and even though we didn’t have Aki’s analytical prowess on our side, it was pretty easy to conclude that they were all Players, given the situation. They wouldn’t have been sent out to track down intruders if they weren’t combat-ready, after all.

“I recognize the lady in the suit,” said one of them. “She’s one of the ones who snuck in the other day!”

“Seriously?” said another. “That means they’re Kiryuu Hajime’s teammates!”

“Looks like he’s as dangerous as we’ve heard. Must’ve decided to move in and take us out himself,” said a third. The whole group came to a stop, glaring at us as they discussed their next move. Or, really, as they discussed Hajime and not much else. He’d gained himself a fair deal of notoriety throughout the Spirit War—a fact that he took no small amount of delight in—and that notoriety had apparently earned him *F*’s attention as well. To them, we were nothing more than Kiryuu Hajime’s teammates. We were an accessory—an afterthought.

“Hey!” shouted one of the men—a fairly young one wearing a baseball cap. “Where’s Kiryuu hiding?! I’m gonna murder his ass, so bring him out already!”

“Hah...ha ha ha ha ha!” I cracked up. After a line like *that*, I just couldn’t help myself. “Who knew? Looks like I have something in common with all of you after all!” I declared, matching their group stare for stare. “See, *I’m* pissed with Kiryuu Hajime too. And thanks to that, if you walk away now, I might just let you go.”

The men exchanged glances with each other, then burst into scornful laughter. I could tell what they were thinking: *What’s this lady even talking about?*

“Oh, for the—quit spouting bullshit, you mouthy bitch!” yelled the foulmouthed man with the baseball cap as he manifested a ball of fire in the palm of his hand. Apparently, he was a pyrokinetic. He pulled back his arm, winding up for a pitch, then hurled the fireball through the air, scoring a direct hit on his target. The moment the fireball landed home, it flared up, swelling to a conflagration large enough to entirely engulf its unfortunate victim, who let out a horrific screech as they were burned to ash.

“Hya ha ha ha! So much for *you*! Looks like you were just a couple mooks, eh?!” cackled the man with the hat. It didn’t take him long to realize that something was wrong, though. *He* was gleefully proud of his overwhelming victory, but not one of his companions was so much as smiling. The opposite, actually. Their faces were pale, and they stared at the man with the hat with expressions of shock and horror.

“Wh-What the hell?! What’re you *doing*?!” one of them—a guy with a crew cut—eventually managed to spit out. “Why’re you attacking *us*?! The enemy’s over *there*!”

The man with the hat gaped at his friend in astonishment. It was understandable, really. After all, to *him*, the man he’d just burned had looked exactly like me.

“Hey, crew cut! I’d be careful if I were you,” I said in a cheerful and *highly* amused tone, my hand clasped over my right eye. “You’ve become my Evil Eye.”

Eternal Wink: the power of visual violation. A power that allowed me to grant anyone within my field of vision the power of the Evil Eye, whether they wanted it or not. In terms of direct, practical combat capability, my power was all but

worthless. I couldn't use the Evil Eye's power myself, and whoever I gave it to couldn't use it effectively on anyone who was even a little wary of them. If I'd given Toki the Evil Eye and he'd tried to use it on the Players we were facing, it would've proven completely ineffective.

All that being said—what if I gave the Evil Eye to my enemy themselves? This kind of goes without saying, but most people aren't wary of their allies. If you're willing to fight by their side, you probably trust them, more or less. Making eye contact and sending nonverbal signals to your allies is a given, as well...and that means the Evil Eye activates as a matter of course.

The moment the group of Players had burst into laughter, I'd used my power to grant the man with the crew cut an Evil Eye. Immediately afterward, he'd made eye contact with the man with the baseball cap, who'd fallen under the Evil Eye's spell as a result. The spell's effect? Tricking him into believing that his friend was his enemy—that is to say, me—and goading him into attacking them.

Sheesh. This really is one fiddly pain in the neck of a power. What sort of ability only works in your favor when you're taking on a ton of enemies at once?

"Your *Evil Eye*...? The hell did you do to me?!" shouted the man with the baseball cap, glaring at me with a look of fury in his eyes. He wasn't happy about having accidentally incinerated his ally, apparently, and since the Evil Eye's effect had already faded, he was looking at the real me this time. You'd think he'd have attacked me right away, but in fact, he'd done nothing of the sort. *None* of them had. Instead, they were glancing at each other with expressions of doubt and paranoia.

My power wasn't all that impressive in and of itself, but when used in just the right way, it could prove a lot more potent than the sum of its parts. It was a cheap trick, of course, and more or less a bluff to boot—a one-off tactic that wouldn't work a second time. If they'd just calmed down and coordinated with each other, they could've coped with it easily. Unfortunately for them, though, all I had to do was throw them off guard for the most sparing of moments. That was all the time that our resident blitzkrieg specialist needed to cut us a path to safety.

A sharp *fwish* rang out as Toki's jagged, beat-up jackknife sliced through the

air. He held it in an underhanded grip, bolting forward with the momentum of a raging gale and plunging into the enemy's formation before erupting into a storm of violence. He sliced, kicked, punched, threw, and sliced again. His stupendously dull knife flashed through the air, through clothes, through weapons, and through flesh with equal inefficiency, tearing as much as it cut. One by one his foes fell, letting out bloodcurdling screams of agony as Toki mowed them down.

"Hey, did you know?" said Toki disinterestedly as he slammed his final enemy up against a wall, holding his knife to the man's throat. "Getting cut hurts a *lot* more when the knife's mostly blunt than it does when it's razor-sharp."

The blade of the knife, still wet with blood, pressed up against the man's throat. Its jagged, crooked, sawlike edge scraped against his skin. It was plain to see that a blade like *that* wouldn't leave a clean wound. It would shred through flesh and muscle inch by excruciating inch, tearing through its victim by virtue of force alone. Just imagining the damage it would inflict left the man pallid and terrified, literally trembling with fear.

"Okay, Toki, that's enough!" I shouted, jumping in to stop him from *actually* slicing the man's throat. "Come on, you know we shouldn't kill him!"

"Hitomi..." said Toki, glancing over at me.

"You really let them have it, though, didn't you?" I said, glancing at the motionless bodies of our erstwhile enemies. "I still can't believe how you manage to overwhelm them like that without even using your power."

"Using my power would just make it take longer," Toki grunted.

Hmm. Yeah, I guess his power is a little...roundabout, you could say? Hajime's and Akutagawa's combat styles were heavily centered around and reliant upon their powers, but Toki was more or less the opposite. He relied on anything and everything *but* his power, and he could take down the majority of Players by means of his physical strength and skill with a knife alone.

"Anyway, what's this about not killing him? Why not? He'll just come back to life again anyway," said Toki.

"I know, but still," I sighed. Personally, I'd never been a fan of that sort of "It's

okay—we can just use the Dragon Balls to bring him back!” logic, but this really wasn’t the time or the place to dig into that sort of discussion.

I took a long, hard look at the man’s face. He looked a little bit relieved—it seemed he was grateful to me for holding the violent madman who’d been threatening him in check. *If I’m right about that, then, well, sorry. I’m not exactly feeling nice today.*

“Lemme borrow your knife for a second,” I said. Toki looked confused for a moment, then passed his knife over without a word. I accepted it, held it in an underhanded grip...then swung it down with all my might, burying it into the wall just an inch or so to the side of the man’s right eye. He let out a short, high-pitched squeal of terror.

“The next one’s going right into your eye,” I said in a cold, uncaring tone.

That’s a lie. I don’t actually have the guts to go through with it.

“Oh, but I won’t *kill* you, just so you know. If a Player kills another Player, they just come back to life. Makes the whole thing pointless, you know? I’ll be sure to stop at *just* the eyeball.”

Another lie. I’m not good enough with a knife to pull that off.

“I’ll be *very* careful to make sure you don’t die...but believe me, I’m going to make you *hurt*.”

Still lying. If I ever tried to torture someone, I’d probably crack before my victim did.

“If you don’t like the sound of that, then you can always answer a couple questions instead. I’m sure you can tell me all about *System*, right?”

“Wha—?!” gasped the man. “H-How do you know about her?!”

“I know because my Evil Eye can see right through you. That means you can’t lie to me either—I’ll know right away, and I bet you can imagine what’ll happen if you try.”

Lying again. My Evil Eye can’t see through squat. It’s useless for this sort of thing. I didn’t let that show, though, instead putting on a vicious, villainous smirk as I looked down at him. I made a show of the power I held over his life,

and I tried to make myself look perilously unstable while I was at it. I conducted myself like the terrifying, dangerous man who'd wormed his way into my heart.

"I think it's about time I got some answers out of you," I said with a sneer, slowly and deliberately wrenching the knife out of the wall and brandishing it in front of him. And carefully, of course—I'd borrowed the thing, so I wasn't about to damage it.

"Yeesh... Women scare the hell outta me sometimes," Toki muttered behind me.

Yeah. That's right. Women are scary as hell when you make them mad, and I think it's about time for a certain jackass to learn that lesson.

Our interrogation bore fruit in the form of a few pieces of useful information. We didn't have any means of *verifying* said information, unfortunately, so we decided to track down and apprehend a few more members of *F* to question, gathering as much info as possible and noting which pieces turned up often enough to seem believable.

Thankfully, none of the Players we'd run into had been particularly tough. I couldn't say for sure if they'd lacked combat experience or if knowing they'd had an ultimate trump card in the form of *System* on their side had caused them to let their guard down, but in any case, nobody we'd encountered was capable of giving Toki and me an even half-decent run for our money. It seemed the same was true for the others as well—Akutagawa, Aki, and Fan had all been working to gather information in parallel with us, and none of them had had any particularly visible injuries when we'd finally met back up again.

"So, let me see if I have this straight," I said. "If we can get to the controls for the tube that *System*'s floating in, we should be able to work things out, right?"

We were on the second floor of one of the Yuzuhara food processing plant's central buildings, in a gap between its third and fourth meeting rooms. Akutagawa had created the space for us, and it had turned out looking sort of like an office. Only people he'd designated would be able to so much as perceive the space's existence, so we were in no danger of being attacked as long as we remained inside. It was a private space just for us, smack-dab in the middle of the enemy's fortress, and we'd all gathered up inside it to exchange

information and figure out our next move.

“*System* was created from the ground up by a spirit named Zeon,” said Akutagawa, “and Zeon designed her to be maintained and used by other humans. I guess that was important since spirits’ ability to interact with our world is limited...? Anyway, it looks like the goal was to have the humans in *F* control her after she was done...”

System was, as it turned out, just about finished already. The only step still incomplete was more or less a period of final adjustments—the final stage of her development. In other words, we’d just barely made it in time.

“That means that if we can get you to that gizmo and you work your magic on it, we’ll be able to seal *System* away for good. Right?” I asked Akutagawa.

“It sounds stupid when you call it a gizmo. You should stop that.”

“Sh-Shut up!”

“But, anyway...yeah, I can probably do that,” Akutagawa continued. “I figure everything that’s hooked up to *System* is kept off the internet, so I doubt they’ve bothered setting up any particularly good security.”

If they’d been using some sort of supernatural power to keep *System* in check, then we would’ve been officially screwed. The fact that they were using state-of-the-art technology, however, meant that Akutagawa was almost certainly capable of seizing control. Apparently, he had some sort of hacking tool ready and waiting to get the job done.

Aki flashed Akutagawa a grin. “Nice one, Gawanagi! Guess all that gaming wasn’t a total waste of time after all!”

“Sounds like the sorta skill I’d expect a gloomy little shut-in like him to have,” Toki snorted derisively.

Akutagawa grimaced. “It’s the sort of skill a brainless punk could never even dream of acquiring,” he muttered.

“Whazzat?!”

“What’s *what*?”

“Okay, okay, break it up,” I said, cutting between the two of them before their

spat could escalate. “We’re in the middle of the enemy’s base! This isn’t the time *or* place for infighting.” Toki let out an irritated snort, Akutagawa grunted and rolled his eyes, and both of them turned their backs to each other. It seemed that hoping for a punk and a shut-in to see eye to eye was expecting the impossible.

“So, like, we’ve got this, right, Tomi? We’re totally gonna wreck *System’s*—” Aki began, then paused, her smile stiffening up in an instant. “I mean, uhh... We can definitely make this, umm, work, right, uh...Miss Tomi?”

“Oh! You don’t have to worry about talking politely, Aki. I don’t know what was wrong with me yesterday,” I said with a slightly bitter smile. A night’s rest had helped calm me down again considerably, and looking back on it, I’d realized that I’d really gone overboard. Pretty much everything I’d said back then was just me lashing out for no good reason.

“Huh? L-Like, seriously?” asked Aki.

“Yeah,” I said. “It feels a little too late to change how we talk to each other, right? And actually, I don’t mind how friendly your tone with me is at all.”

“Woo-hoo!” Aki shouted. “Right, exactly! Now *that’s* the Tomi we know and love!”

“So...can I keep my headphones on too?” Akutagawa casually asked.

“No,” I snapped, shooting him a glare. He scowled back at me, but he left his headphones right where they were around his neck, so apparently he wasn’t planning on disobeying me.

“Ha ha ha! Tough luck, Gawanagi!” laughed Aki.

Considering we were in enemy territory and about to try to seal away a truly preposterous foe, it was rather remarkable how *not* tense all of my companions seemed. They were acting as cheerful and casual as ever. To be fair, I was in a similar boat—all things considered, I wasn’t feeling that much pressure at all, and I was collected enough to stay calm and rational. I had to imagine our relaxed attitude was thanks to the Spirit War’s rules. The knowledge that even if we did die we’d come right back was a relief. It was a pleasant little bit of insurance that in turn ensured we never had to stress out *too* much about any

of this.

“We just come right back if we die, huh?” Hajime had once grumbled to me. *“Bwa ha ha! Those spirits really are a twisted bunch. They know exactly what makes us humans tick.”*

At first, it didn’t make sense to me. I’d thought that it would make a much more brutal and attention-grabbing show for the spirits if we really *were* in a life-or-death battle royale. After actually participating in the Spirit War myself, though, I realized that the truth was the exact opposite. If we really *were* risking our lives in these battles, most people would go completely on the defensive, prioritizing their well-being over any sort of proactive attempt at winning the War. *Most* people would be so scared of getting hurt—and even so scared of hurting other people—they’d be too busy shivering with fear to put on a proper show. Battles like *that* wouldn’t be worth watching at all.

Humans are, at their core, cowardly and self-interested creatures. There aren’t all that many of us out there who have wishes they consider so important that they’d *really* put their lives on the line for them. *That’s* why the Spirit War needed to bring people back to life—it needed a built-in reset mechanic. It let us Players know that even if we did get knocked out of the running before the War was over, we could just load up our old save and go back to our ordinary lives. The *lack* of risk is what let us go on the offensive, and it’s what let us do so with the utmost of savagery. It made us think that it didn’t matter if we died, since we’d just come back, and that it didn’t matter if we killed, since our victims would just come back as well. When I thought about it in those terms, I had to agree: the Spirit War really *was* pretty twisted.

“Most of the lookouts have left, everyone! There’s only two of them now!” shouted Fan. She was stationed at one of the windows in our room, keeping watch over the entryway to a nearby building—specifically, the building that *System* was being kept inside.

“Just two of them? All right, then. Everything’s going just as expected so far—time to move into the final stage of our plan,” I said, then looked around at everyone. It seemed like the right moment to give them a few words of encouragement. “Let’s get in there and wrap this up nice and quickly! The more time we waste, the more likely it becomes that Kiryuu Hajime’ll wander his way

in to mess things up!”

Toki and Fan took down the guards in the blink of an eye, then took their place to keep watch while the remaining three of us slipped inside. Before long, we reached a set of pure white, heavy-looking doors—the sort that slid open to the sides.

“*System* must be right through here,” I muttered, then tried to open the doors up. They were locked, surprise surprise. “Think you can handle this, Akutagawa?” I said, glancing over at him.

Akutagawa stepped up to the doors and extended a hand out in front of him. He raised his pointer and middle fingers, pressing them together and pointing them at the door. Then he simply opened his fingers up, like he was zooming in on a picture on a smartphone. That motion activated his power, *Dead Space*, and in the space between the doors, a new gap was born. A sharp, metallic *crack* rang out as they were forced open.

It’s finally time, I thought to myself. *The doorway to this mission’s final stage has just been opened*. From here on out, we’d be moving on to the real meat of our plan. Step one was for Aki to take a look at everyone inside the room. If they weren’t Players, then Akutagawa would be able to put them down with ease. If there *were* Players among them, I’d buy time with my Evil Eye while we called in Toki and Fan to take care of them. Finally, once we’d dealt with all the opposition, Akutagawa would hack into the program that was controlling *System* and take it over. We’d put a lot of thought into our plan, and I’d run over it time and time again...but the moment I saw what lay beyond the double doors, my mind went blank. My eye widened, and I was struck speechless.

“Devastation” was the only word that did the sight justice. *Something* had left the room completely and utterly devastated. The place was massive—the size of a school gym—and absolutely everything within had been destroyed. All the machinery that was cluttering up the room had been pulverized far beyond the point of recognition, and the walls and ceiling looked like they were moments away from collapsing entirely.

Above all else, though, my gaze was drawn toward the room’s center—to the

decimated remains of the column-like tank. The fluid within had spilled out onto the floor, and most of the tubes that had been connected to it seemed to have been pulled out. As for *her*—she was simply gone. The most powerful Player of all was simply nowhere to be seen.

“Wh-What on earth...?” I stammered in disbelief. Had somebody unleashed *System* on the world? Had they decided that taking the intruders out of the picture was worth the risk of deploying her while she was still incomplete, uncontrollable, and dangerous? Had she gone on a rampage? Or self-destructed? I couldn’t make sense of the situation at all, but there *was* one thing I understood painfully well: the plan that we’d put together had been rendered completely meaningless.

“T-Tomi, look!” Aki shouted. Her words brought me back to my senses, and I looked in the direction she was pointing. There, atop a mountain of scrap and rubble, I could just barely make out a figure as it stepped into view.

I drew in a sharp breath as I felt myself break out in a cold sweat. It was a girl. She was short, scrawny, and wearing a few scraps of dingy white cloth in lieu of real clothing. Her hair was glossy, black, and so off-puttingly long that it dragged across the ground behind her. Her face was so perfectly featured you’d think she was a doll, yet somehow, she came across as even *more* expressionless than a doll would’ve. Her eyes were like marbles, staring vacantly at us without expressing so much as a hint of emotion. Hers was a face I could never forget: the face of the very same girl I’d seen a few days beforehand, floating in the now ruined tank.

“*System*,” Aki whispered as she trembled with horror. That settled it—all hope that she was a look-alike or a twin had just gone out the window. *Head Hunting* couldn’t be fooled. The little girl before us really was *System*: the ultimate Player.

System didn’t say a word. She just stared at us expressionlessly, like a puppet or a child who was still too young to speak. I, meanwhile, was paralyzed. The foe we couldn’t allow to be released, no matter what it took, was right in front of me. All the effort and thought we’d put into our last-ditch plan to seal her away had come to nothing. And now that *System* was free, the War was effectively already over.

I gritted my teeth as hard as I could. I could feel my train of thought steering toward an attempt to escape from reality, and I couldn't let that happen—I had to stay grounded. I wasn't ready to give up just yet, and the moment I stopped thinking, it would all be over. I'd betrayed Hajime, and that made me the team's current leader. What sort of leader starts flailing around in a panic just because the situation took an unexpected turn? I had to calm down and analyze things with a clear mind. *Come on, think! Think! It's too soon to lose your head over—*

"Huh?" I grunted as I looked up, finally having regained a semblance of composure. There, directly in front of me, was the expressionless little girl. She must've been over ten meters away from me barely a moment ago, but she'd closed that distance in a single bound and was now midair, her face still betraying not even a hint of emotion as she swung her little fist toward me. Her freakishly long hair flowed through the air behind her like a dragon in flight, tracing along the path she'd traveled.

Oh. I guess I'm screwed, I thought. It turned out it really *was* the right moment to panic after all—or rather, a moment when whether or not I'd panicked wouldn't have made even the slightest bit of difference. This, it seemed, was as far as I could go. I'd be taken down like any other faceless grunt, having failed to accomplish so much as a single thing.

But, I mean, it's not like this wasn't easy to see coming. Plotting to seal away an ultimate life-form like her was basically declaring to the audience that you were about to die tragically. When characters like her showed up in fiction, it was absolutely guaranteed that they'd be unleashed in one way or another. After all, it'd make for a pretty weak story if they really *were* just sealed away in the end.

I would've liked to have said something clever in the instant before I died, but unfortunately, I didn't have the time for that. *System's* fist was already right before my eye and closing in fast. In that final moment, I made my peace, gave up on it all, and closed my left eye without a word, sealing it shut—just like its counterpart.

Well, that's that. I couldn't cut it. Sorry, Hajime.

“Supernatural battle playbook, rule one.”

The next thing I knew, a terrible shock wave felt like it nearly blew me away. It took me a moment to realize, however, that I hadn't actually been *hurt* in the least. I fearfully opened my eye to find someone in front of me, his broad, black-clad back looming before me, his coat flapping away in spite of the total lack of wind.

“No matter what happens, *never* close your eyes,” he said, his all too familiar voice soothing my eardrums. “Whether your fortunes are for better or for worse, don't let them slip past you. Whether you find yourself in a comedy or a tragedy, don't let it play out without you. Never avert your gaze when victory and defeat hang in the balance. Never turn your back when the stakes are a matter of life and death. The story of your life is the best tale you'll ever find, and you can only read it once. Whether the ending that awaits you is happy or sad...you have a duty to witness every moment of it.”

I couldn't even begin to guess where he'd come from, but before I knew it, he was standing between me and *System*, her fist caught in his hand. “Come on, you're *Eternal Wink*! Closing *both* your eyes completely ruins the image. Your job's to keep winking away while you witness all my exploits—got it?” he said, his voice infused with such fearlessness and arrogance you could tell in an instant he thought the world revolved around him. He twisted his hand off to the side, deflecting *System*'s strike and sending her flying across the room. *System*, however, didn't launch a counterattack, simply sailing lightly through the air and touching down silently on a pile of rubble.

The man's silver hair swayed in the air as he turned to face me. His eyes, one black, one red, and both shining with a keen light of insight, bored into me from behind his pointlessly tiny, round sunglasses.

“H-H-Hajime...?” I stammered.

“Don't call me Hajime,” he said, his confident, villainous smirk as broad and unshakable as ever. He stood tall and majestic, declaring his truth as if it were the grandest secret the world had to offer. “The name's Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First.”

I found myself overcome with emotion—with a powerful sense of relief. I know it's pathetic of me to admit this, considering all the big talk I'd done the day before, but it was honestly shocking just how reassuring Hajime's sudden appearance was.

"What're you people doing here, anyway?" Hajime asked offhandedly. "I said that I'd crush *F* on my own and that you all should stay out of it, right?"

For a moment, none of us could find the right words to reply with. "Umm," I finally said, "th-that's kinda hard to... W-Wait, no, that's not important! This is terrible, Hajime! *System*'s loose! We have to run for it!"

To be clear, I wasn't trying to dodge his question. I just knew that not even Hajime could possibly beat *System*. Now that my master plan had failed, the only option left to us was to make a break for it. I wasn't sure how far we'd actually get, but we didn't have the luxury of choice.

"First," a voice rang out. It took me a few seconds to realize that the word that voice had spoken was a name—or rather, a portion of Hajime's "true name." It took a few seconds further to realize that the source of the voice had been *System*. "Why have you stayed my hand?" she asked in a quiet, disinterested mutter, looking down on me with a frigid gaze. Her voice was surprisingly low-pitched for a little girl like her, and she sounded more than a little eerie...plus, she sure did say "stay my hand." Apparently, she was one of those girls whose speech skewed toward the archaic side of things.

"You were the one who told me to eradicate *F*, were you not?" *System* continued.

"Okay, calm down. These people aren't in *F*. They're *my* teammates," said Hajime, casually conversing with *System* like it was just the natural thing to do. I was bewildered, and Aki and Akutagawa looked completely dumbfounded.

"H-Hitomi? How's everything going in here...?" called out Fan. She and Toki had been keeping watch outside, but now they were stepping into the room together, presumably to check in on us.

"Is *System*—whahuuuuuuh?!" Fan wailed, her eyes widening. "Wh-Why's Kiryuu here?! And wait, that girl...is she...*System*...?"

“Just what the *hell* is going on in here?” asked Toki, who looked just as shocked.

“Oh, hey! Looks like we’ve got the whole team together, huh? All of *Fallen Black’s* Wings are accounted for! Nice—saves me the trouble of summoning you,” said Hajime, stepping away from me and strolling over to *System*. I winced, thinking he was in danger, but she simply stood there, not reacting at all as he drew closer. “All right, people, listen up!” Hajime shouted as he plopped a hand down on *System’s* head, scaring me half to death in the process. It was an incredibly overfamiliar gesture—almost like she was his little sister or something.

“This kid’s on the team, starting today!”

“She’s...*what?!*” I shouted. Every one of us was left in a state of shock. *What the actual hell is that lunatic saying?*

“Oh, right. No more calling her *System* either. That name’s banned. The more I think about it, the less I’m into it,” Hajime continued, mussing up *System’s* hair as he spoke. She just let it happen without showing the slightest sign of resistance. “I’ll come up with a *real* name for you and your power before long—one that’ll blow you away. Look forward to it.”

“Very well,” *System* said, then immediately fell silent again.

“W-Wai... Wait a second, Hajime!” I shouted as my thought process gradually caught up with the state of affairs. “What do you *mean*, she’s on the team? Didn’t you say you were going to crush *F* last night? I thought that meant you were going to *fight* her...?”

“Bwa ha ha!” cackled Hajime, laughing it up like he was having the time of his life. “That *was* the plan—at first. I was planning on giving the self-proclaimed ‘ultimate Player’ an up close and personal lesson on what it means to *really* be undefeatable. But y’know,” he continued, glancing down at *System*, “I couldn’t exactly go all out on a cute li’l brat like her, could I?”

I was, once again, speechless. Whether or not Hajime would do something was governed by one very simple principle: whether or not he thought it would

make him cool. In other words, in Hajime's mind, fighting a foe who looked like a little girl would be a blemish on his pride, no matter *how* supposedly overpowered she was.

When I took a step back to view the situation objectively, though, it occurred to me that in a certain sense, this was the best possible outcome we could've asked for. *My* method would've allowed us to beat her without ever even fighting her. Our ultimate foe would've remained sealed away for eternity. I'd thought that not taking on someone as tough as her in a straight-up fight was the best possible strategy, but I realized now that I'd overlooked another option. If your foe is unbearably powerful...you can just bring them over to *your* side and use them as you please. It was such an optimal solution, I'd never even considered it. It was in a totally different dimension from the plans *I'd* been agonizing over. In terms of lateral thinking, I'd been outdone in every possible way.

"B-But, Hajime," I stammered, "*how?*"

"Oh, right. Well," said Hajime, pulling something out from his coat's pocket. "I got lucky. Had some emergency Hi-Chew on hand. I said I'd give it to her if she joined my team, and she did."

"You *bribed* her with *candy*?!"

Hajime completely ignored my astonishment, instead unwrapping the Hi-Chew and chucking it in *System's* general direction. *System* opened her mouth up wide, caught it midair in a remarkable display of agility, and started chewing away. Her expression was as blank as ever, but weirdly enough, she somehow looked incredibly satisfied anyway.

H-He's feeding her like a pet! He seriously went and tamed our ultimate enemy with a pack of Hi-Chew!

"So, what're you all doing here, Hitomi?" Hajime asked.

I hesitated for a moment, but after a few seconds of thought, I let out a heavy sigh and laid the truth out on the table. "We came here to crush *F*," I admitted.

"Huh?" grunted Hajime. "I thought I told you not to get involved."

"You did, yeah," I said, "and we decided to ignore that order. We were all so

pissed off with you that we staged a rebellion to get payback.”

The moment the words left my mouth, the rest of our teammates began to stir with obvious unrest. I was an exception, though. I stared Hajime right in the face as I carried on.

“We decided to betray you and take care of *F* before you had the chance...but it looks like we didn’t pull it off,” I said with a flippant shrug. “Got a problem with that?”

“Bwa ha ha! Not a one,” said Hajime with his trademark sneer. “You almost got me, but I guess you’d better try a bit harder next time.” That was all he had to say about my betrayal. He made no attempt whatsoever to rebuke me for it, and he didn’t seem shocked in the least. “All right,” he continued, “guess it’s time to go hunt down the survivors!”

Clearly, Hajime had already moved on, and clearly, he’d never doubted for a second that eventually, all of us would end up returning to his side. You *could* say it was a sign that he had faith in us, I suppose, but personally, I thought it’d be more accurate to say that he was just being way too overconfident. Or maybe it wasn’t about us at all—maybe he just didn’t *care* whether or not we betrayed him, in the end. Maybe calling us his teammates was just lip service. The one thing I could say for sure was that I’d failed to give him the taste of reality I’d wanted to. Quite the contrary—if anyone had ended up getting subjected to a sudden and shocking reversal of fortunes, it was me.

“You sure thought of a good way to liven things up this time, though, Hitomi,” Hajime casually added. Whether or not he’d picked up on my internal conflict was anyone’s guess. “You really are the best girl I could ask for.”

Once again, I fell into silence, unable to muster a reply. Meanwhile, Hajime dramatically flung his arms apart as he turned to face the rest of our teammates.

“It’s *massacre* time,” he proclaimed. “Listen up, all ye Wings of *Fallen Black*! Your new job is to hunt down and exterminate every single remaining member of *F*! Leave no survivors! Hitomi’s in charge of all the logistics, and when you’re finished, we’re throwing a welcome party for our new member!”

It was pure, classic Hajime: a set of orders so broad and rough you could only

assume he'd come up with them on the spot. Strangely enough, though, those orders made me feel a powerful sense of relief as my heart began to pound away in my chest. I didn't know for sure if he trusted me or if he was just using me, but part of me couldn't help but feel profoundly content when he'd called me a good girl—even if he *did* mean that I was his doormat, deep down.

Well, that settles it. Looks like I'm just a gigantic masochist when all's said and done. Nothing made me happier than those precious moments when he jerked me around on one of his whims. I had a *serious* thing for bad boys.

"Heeey, earth to Tomi? Oof, nope, she's out—I can see the little hearts in her eyes and everything."

"Ugh... 'Course this is how it'd end. What a crock of bullshit."

"Oh, those two!"

"Can I just go home now...?"

I finally noticed Aki, Toki, Fan, and Akutagawa all giving me looks of disgust and exasperation, and I quickly pulled myself back together.

"Not happening, Akutagawa. *You've* got work to do here," said Hajime. "The only one who's going home is me. I've been getting stuff done since bright and early this morning, and I need my beauty sleep." He stifled a yawn, then turned to *System*. "That goes for you too—help everyone out here. This'll be your first job as part of the team. If you get confused, just shut your trap and do whatever Hitomi tells you."

System gave him a silent nod.

Wait, what? Seriously? "W-Wait a second, Hajime!" I shouted. He was already on his way to the door, but I grabbed him by the arm to hold him back. "Y-You can't just leave her with us! She's the ultimate Player, remember?! What am I even supposed to—" I said, then suddenly cut off my complaining when I smelled something unusual.

It smells like iron, so...blood? As I grabbed his arm, the motion happened to flip his coat open just enough for me to get a glance at the shirt beneath—and to see that Hajime's abdomen was soaked with blood. He was hurt, and badly enough that it was painful to look at.

“H-Hajime—” I began, but before I could say anything else, Hajime pressed a finger to my lips, cutting me off.

“The rest is up to you, Hitomi,” he said, then set off once more for the door. His attitude and tone of voice were the same as ever, but looking at him a little more closely, I noticed that the way he was walking was just a little different from usual. He had a very slight limp, so subtle I’d missed it before.

Suddenly, I had more questions than I knew what to do with. I glanced at *System*, then looked around at the devastation that dominated the room. The longer I looked, the more a seemingly preposterous idea loomed large in my mind: could all that wreckage be the aftermath of a fight? Had Hajime and *System* engaged in a full-on supernatural battle, totaling the facility in the process? The more I thought about it, the more obvious it seemed. I mean, rationally speaking, it was totally unthinkable that the enemy’s most powerful combatant would turn traitor for a couple of candies!

The conclusion seemed inescapable: Hajime and *System* had already fought before we’d even arrived. He’d brought *Lucifer’s Strike* to bear against the most powerful opponent he could ever hope to face. Suddenly, the state of the room seemed totally unsurprising. If anything, the fact that the building was still standing was kind of a shock, in this context!

Thinking a step further still, I realized something about how *System* had moved when she’d very nearly murdered me a minute or so earlier. Looking at it with Hajime at the front of my mind, I realized that she’d used the exact same method of approximating the instantaneous movement techniques you’d see in anime that Hajime did: by manipulating gravity to move in a manner her opponent wouldn’t even be able to perceive. In other words, *System* had used Hajime’s power—or at the very least, she’d had some means of approximating its effects.

That, in turn, meant that *System* had already awakened at least once. When her ultimate power had proven less ultimate than expected, she’d asspulled her way to greater heights. Her flawless, balance-breaking cheat of a skill was in full effect, and yet Hajime had clashed with her anyway.

I had no idea what had started the fight. Maybe Hajime had instigated it, or

maybe somebody in *F* had unleashed *System* on him. Maybe *System* had broken free and gone on a rampage on her own initiative. I also didn't know how the fight had concluded. Who, exactly, had won? What sort of occurrence had led to the singularly absurd reality that *System* was one of us now? I didn't understand *anything* when all was said and done.

Maybe—just maybe—Hajime had protected us? If worse had come to worst and *System* really had attacked us, we would've been wiped out, no question about it. Maybe Hajime had realized that and slipped ahead of us to take on the enemy's trump card single-handedly, all in an effort to do his job as our boss? Of course, I realized even as I was thinking it that interpreting the situation like *that* was dangerously optimistic of me, not to mention naive.

"He really never changes, huh?" I muttered quietly to myself. I could tell that I was probably smiling, though not intentionally. It was downright frustrating how stubbornly Kiryuu Hajime refused to be anyone other than Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First, and laughing it off was the most I could do to deal with it.

He'd always blather on and on about pointless nonsense, and he would never say a single word about what was actually important. He'd hide all the effort he put in and all the pain he suffered at all costs, and no matter how hard-fought a victory was, he'd come out on the other side *insisting* it had been a piece of cake. He'd never show others his weaknesses or flaws, and dedicated every ounce of his heart, his soul, and his very being into making himself look like a badass. It was a little frustrating how he obstinately refused to open up to me, for sure—frustrating, and infuriating.

"Sorry, everyone," I said, turning to face my remaining teammates. "Looks like we lost to our moron of a boss in the end."

I couldn't help but chuckle at myself. My little revolution had ended in pathetic failure—not with a spectacular self-destruction or a last-ditch sacrifice, but with a sad, unsatisfying whimper. The instigator—that is to say, me—wasn't punished or penalized, and she would get to go back to her position as the organization's second-in-command. It was one heck of an anticlimax...*but*.

"But," I continued, "this isn't over! I'll take another stab at him for sure someday, and when that time comes, I'll be counting on you all again—and I'll

be putting in even more effort than ever!”

“Ha ha ha, sounds good to me!” said Aki. “We’ll feed Ryu a big ol’ slice of reality next time for sure!”

“I’m on your side, Hitomi! I promise!” agreed Fan. The two of them accepted me without hesitation, in spite of how pathetically I’d been behaving.

The boys, on the other hand, looked a lot more grim. I was worried that they were mad at me for a second, but then Toki spoke up. “Looks like we’ve got company on the way,” he said.

“Judging by the footsteps...there’s fifteen—no, twenty of them,” said Akutagawa. Apparently, they weren’t so much angry as they were back into combat-ready mode already.

I perked my ears and found that they were right. I could hear footsteps pounding their way toward us. We’d raised quite the commotion throughout our little venture, and it seemed we’d attracted our remaining enemies’ attention in the process. They had no idea that *System* was on our side now, of course, so they were probably planning on barging right in for a full frontal assault.

“So? What’s the plan, Hitomi?” asked Toki.

“We’ll do what Hajime told us to,” I answered immediately. “We’re going to take out all the surviving members of *F*.”

“So we’re just doing his bidding in the end, huh...?” Toki grumbled. “You sure you’re okay with that?”

“Yeah. I think I probably am,” I replied. *For now, anyway.*

“Ugh...” Toki groaned. “Looks like I joined up with a whole organization of dumbasses. The boss was bad enough, but the second-in-command’s a moron in her own right.”

“Seconded,” Akutagawa mumbled.

Just then, the enemy forces finally stormed into the room. There really were around twenty of them, and they were clearly *not* here to mess around. They flooded into the room, shouting and taunting belligerently.

“You. The woman called Hitomi.”

A voice cut through the clamor, and I felt someone tug at the hem of my suit.

“I await your command.”

It was *System*, and I was so shocked I actually jumped. *O-Oh, right. I’m supposed to be giving her orders, aren’t I?*

“U-Umm...okay, then, you’re in charge of...beating the crap out of the enemy, I guess.”

It was about as hilariously sloppy as an order could possibly be, but *System* gave me an almost robotic nod in response.

“Y-You’re really going to do what I tell you to?” I asked, just to be on the safe side, but this time, *System* ignored me, instead turning to gaze at our enemies. It seemed she wasn’t planning on talking any more than she absolutely had to. I won’t lie: getting snubbed that blatantly kinda hurt.

“All right, then... Let’s do this, everyone,” I said, making an effort to switch myself into battle mode. I didn’t feel scared in the slightest. I had friends I could rely on with me, the ultimate Player was following my orders for some reason, and a certain chronically incomprehensible pathological chuuni was counting on me. I had nothing to fear. I fixed my eyes upon my foes and stepped forth onto the battlefield, my allies at my side.

“Let’s get this massacre started!”

And so, the curtain closed upon our battle with *F*. It felt like it had been a long road, though really, the whole conflict had barely taken any time at all. In any case, we had won what I felt safe describing as an overwhelming victory. The enemy organization had been wiped from the face of the earth, and we’d claimed their trump card as our own. It actually felt like things had turned out a little *too* well, even.

According to Leatia, the ringleader of the whole incident—Zeon the spirit—had been apprehended as well. The spirits, it seemed, had been making moves of their own behind the scenes while we were fighting on the front lines. She explained that Zeon had been imprisoned in whatever the Spirit Realm

equivalent of a jail was, though I'm not going to pretend that I understood most—or any, really—of the details of said explanation.

The humans who had made up the bulk of *F*'s membership all had their powers and memories of the War stripped from them, and they returned to their daily lives. The Yuzuhara food processing plant, meanwhile, was returned to its previous purpose overnight by means of the spirits' power. With the erasure of their secret base, *F*'s extermination was complete.

We never learned what its members had really been fighting for. Maybe they'd been hired to do it, or maybe there was some deeper set of circumstances that had drawn them in. Personally, I was fairly certain that everyone had *some* sort of circumstance that drove them to fight, though the scale might've varied quite a bit from person to person. I mean, look at me and how *I* had betrayed Hajime—that was for just about as petty and personal of a reason as you could've possibly found.

System, by the way, really did join our team. She was a quiet, expressionless kid, but she didn't actually do anything *bad*, and it wasn't long before all the girls on the team—me included—had started getting along with her pretty well. We cut her hair, bought her clothes, and generally had fun hanging out with her. Oh, but of course, we weren't actually calling her *System* anymore. Her power had a new name: the endlessly altered Decalogue, *White Rulebook*. We'd taken to describing it as the ability to bend cause and effect to her will.

Hajime had named the power, of course, and, I mean...yeah. We kinda just rolled our eyes and told him to have it his way. Her power's name aside, Hajime and I had collaborated to come up with a proper name for her: Tanaka Umeko. I'd thought up her family name, while her first name was Hajime's doing. I'd taken to calling her Umeko, myself.

As for *why* she'd chosen to stay with our little group—well, that was a mystery. Whatever Umeko was thinking and whatever Hajime's objective had been when he'd recruited her, the fact that she was the ultimate Player hadn't changed. She was an irregular element in the Spirit War, and there was absolutely no chance that the other Players would simply stand back and let her fly free. As a result, Tanaka Umeko joining our team had the side effect of sending the War into a new, even more intense period of action than ever

before. We of *Fallen Black* stood at the epicenter of that disaster...but that's a story for another day.

Epilogue: Kiryuu Hajime—Tome the Seventh of the Twenty-First Year

On and on the puppets dance

Heedless of the closing call, they twirl in trance behind the curtain

They cannot see the strings that guide them

They do not know they're nothing more than soulless marionettes

—Excerpt from the *Reverse Crux Record*

One day, a few weeks after *F*'s eradication, Hajime's right eye was afflicted with a terrible malady.

"Well, crap. I really screwed up this time," he muttered inconsolably. He was sitting on my bed, head cradled in his hands, and was very obviously *deeply* depressed. I could just barely make out the white eye patch he was wearing through the cracks between his fingers.

"I told you, didn't I?" I sighed. "I warned you over and over again that this would happen if you kept sleeping with your colored contact in!"

Hajime, of course, had ignored my warnings each and every time. All I could do was sigh. The primary cause of his malady was the fact that he'd kept a colored contact in for literally days on end. That's a great way to get all sorts of bacteria in your eye, and surprise surprise, he wound up with an infection in the form of a nasty sty. He'd been pretty good in the past about not keeping the contact in the same eye for too long and washing it on a regular basis, but for some reason, he'd been slacking off lately, and now he was paying the price.

"Well, anyway," I said, "no more color contacts for you until your eye gets better."

"Whoa, wait a second," said Hajime. "Are you telling me to just roll over and

die, or what?”

Are you telling me that not playing evil eye for a week or two's going to be the death of you? “You heard me—contacts are banned, and that’s final!” I said, then tossed the contact case—which I’d confiscated shortly beforehand—over to Umeko, who was standing off in a corner. “Keep hold of those for now, okay, Umeko? And you’re not allowed to give them to Hajime, no matter *what* he says to you!”

“Very well,” Umeko said with a robotic nod, then stashed the case away in the pocket of her black dress.

Ever since she’d joined up with *Fallen Black*, Umeko had drifted around from place to place without any real permanent home. One night she’d stay over at my apartment, and the next she’d wind up at Aki’s house. Speaking of Aki, her family was loaded, so she had a ton of old clothes to pass on to Umeko. As a consequence, all of us girls had more or less ended up using her as our own personal dress-up doll. We’d played around with her hair a lot too, eventually settling on the bob cut she was currently sporting.

The girl once known as *System* had now become *White Rulebook*. She was still the ultimate, unbeatable Player, though, and that meant that giving Hajime’s contact lens to Umeko would ensure that he wouldn’t be able to get his hands on it easily. Though actually, on second thought, I’m skipping ahead—she wouldn’t really *prove* herself to be ultimate and unbeatable until a little while after this point.

“Hey, Hajime,” I said. “About Hinoemata...are you *really* sure it was a good idea to let him join the team?”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Hajime countered.

“Nothing, really, I just...I dunno. He feels kind of, how to put it...kind of *off* to me, I guess.”

Shortly after *F*’s downfall and Umeko’s recruitment, a series of events had led to yet another Player joining up with *Fallen Black*. Our newest member was a boy named Hinoemata, who looked like he was in his mid to late teens. He was sociable, good-humored, and generally affable, and our boss had granted him power the name *Lost Regalia*: the power to render regency null and void. To

put it in slightly simpler terms, he possessed the power of regicide—the power to deny kings of all shapes and sizes their rightful dominion. His power also happened to be the only one in the world that could counteract Umeko's, most likely. He was more or less *System's*—or rather, *White Rulebook's*—natural enemy.

“Bwa ha ha!” cackled Hajime. “You’re not wrong there. His power really *is* something totally different. It’s not like it’s particularly strong on its own, but it can take down the ultimate power without a hitch. It’s like how in President, the only card that can beat a joker is the three of spades—otherwise the weakest card in the deck.”

Umeko had been created for the sole purpose of bringing the Spirit War to an end. Thanks to *Fallen Black's* falling-out, however—or thanks to our efforts, if you want to put it nicely—the plan failed, and the war would continue after all...but I couldn't help but wonder how things would've happened if we *hadn't* gotten involved. It was totally possible that the war might not've ended even then, considering that Hinoemata most likely could've done what was impossible for everyone else by killing *System*.

If there was such a thing as a god of war out there somewhere, I'd almost have to suspect that said god had been displeased with the idea of a man-made Player ending the conflict and had sent Hinoemata out to put an end to her. A Player as balance-breaking as her would spoil the whole War, and it only made sense to send an irregular to deal with an irregular.

All that being said, when I said something was off about him, I hadn't actually been talking about any of that fantastical, high-concept superpower stuff at all.

“I mean, that *is* pretty weird too, I'll admit...but I was talking about Hinoemata *himself*. He sort of scares me,” I said.

Hinoemata was a cute, charming young man. He was cheerful and sociable, and he'd been the one to approach us and ask to join our team. And yet, for some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to *like* him. I couldn't explain why, but for some reason, talking with him made a chill run down my spine, without fail. Everything he said felt shallow and artificial, and looking him in the eye made me feel an overpowering sense of unease and instability.

“Wasn’t Hinoemata the one who set things up for Kudou Mirei to awaken? He didn’t even ask us or anything, and sent her to make contact with *Virgin Child* on top of it,” I noted. As a direct result, the literary club had ended up engaging in a supernatural battle against the president of their school’s student council. *Virgin Child*’s isolation from the War at large had begun to break down, ever so slightly. I’d heard that Hajime had even gone out to witness the battle himself.

“Bwa ha ha! That’s fine by me—any organization worth its stuff has at least one guy like him on board,” said Hajime, laughing away my concerns like he always did. Really, I shouldn’t have expected any less from the guy who brushed off my full-on betrayal like it was nothing. He was so open to his subordinates acting on their own initiative, it was kind of a problem. Or maybe it was the other way around—maybe he actively *wanted* his companions to be the sort of people who wouldn’t hesitate to defy him. Maybe he *wanted* to work with dangerous people who didn’t have so much as a hint of loyalty, who’d stab him in the back the second they saw an opening.

“Anyway, I don’t care about all that stuff right now. I need to figure out how to deal with my eye before anything else,” Hajime grumbled, his expression turning glum again in an instant. It seemed his sty was weighing so heavily on his mind, he couldn’t think about anything else. I felt like an idiot for worrying about our organization’s future while the boss himself was stuck on his own petty problems.

“This isn’t the sort of thing you can *deal* with,” I sighed. “You just have to let it heal naturally.”

“Ugggh—I would’ve recruited someone with a healing power if I’d known *this* was gonna happen!” Hajime grumbled, then flopped over on the bed. A second later, though, he shot right back up again. “That’s it! I just had a great idea!”

“Wh-What?” I asked.

“*Virgin Child*! I can just have *them* take care of this! One of them has a recovery power! *Route of Origin*—the power of ultimate regression! It’s not *technically* a healing power, but it can still totally heal any injury in the blink of an eye!”

“Oh, huh,” I said. I didn’t know much about any of their powers, myself. “Are

you sure you want to do that, though? I thought you were trying to keep them out of the War? Having one of them cure you feels like it'll make all that a lot messier..."

"And that's where you come in, *Eternal Wink*," said Hajime. "You can just hypnotize her and falsify some memories to cover it all up."

Oh, so that's his game. It was probably possible, to be fair—the kids were Players, sure, but as long as they weren't on guard around us, my power *would* work on them.

"Here's the plan," said Hajime. "Step one: we abduct the target. Step two: we get her to fix my eye. Step three: we use the Evil Eye to mess with her memories. Step four: we put her back where we found her. How's that? Perfect, right?"

"Not even close. Do you realize how many important details you just skimmed over?" I'd heard some pretty rough plans in my time, but this one had to be up there in the rankings. "Slipshod" didn't even *begin* to describe it!

"Eh, it'll work out," said Hajime, flippantly dismissing my objection. "Pulling off a kidnapping'll be a cinch with Akutagawa on our side."

"I mean, sure, but still..." *Hmm. I guess it can't hurt to give it a shot?* I was pretty sure it wasn't going to go well, but I figured even if we *did* fail, we didn't have much to lose, and Hajime at least probably thought he had a lot to gain if things went well. "I guess I should probably get in touch with everyone, but I don't know what they'll say about this..." I muttered. "Oh, right—what sort of person is that *Route of Whatever* girl? Like, what does she look like? Any distinctive features?"

"Ah. I mean, not like I've actually met her myself. I've only seen her from pretty far off. I think..." Hajime paused, seeming to search his memories. "Yeah, pretty sure she had long hair!"

In spite of my apprehensions, I began setting up the groundwork for Hajime's plan. Some of our members immediately started griping about how they weren't interested in getting involved in Hajime's crap, but I somehow managed to talk them into it, and before I knew it, our kidnapping operation was moving

ahead at a breakneck pace. Taking our time would've totally defeated the purpose, in this case—the whole point was to get Hajime's eye healed up as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, however, the whole “moving forward at a breakneck pace” thing ended up causing the most disastrous mistake imaginable.

“What do you *mean*, we got the wrong one?!”

Twilight was setting in, all of us except for Hinoemata were gathered up by a riverside path, and I was screaming. I took a long, hard look at the long-haired, inexplicably apron-clad girl whom Umeko was carrying on her back. My Evil Eye—or rather, *Hajime's* Evil Eye—had sent her off into a deep sleep with ease, and she looked remarkably comfortable. It probably would've looked really weird from an outsider's perspective to see Umeko, who appeared elementary-school-aged at the oldest, carrying a fully grown high schooler on her back, but she was undeniably the strongest of us and had seemed like the right person for the job.

“W-Wait, what are you *talking* about?! Isn't this the girl you described?!” I shouted.

“No, she's *not*, dumbass!” snapped Hajime. “That one's Kushikawa Hatoko—*her* power's *Over Element*. I wanted *Route of Origin*!”

Hajime sounded like he was at a loss. He'd made the sign for me to put her to sleep, and I'd done that without issue, but it had never even crossed my mind that she might be the wrong girl entirely. Apparently, she *wasn't* the one with *Route of Origin* after all.

Seriously...? Th-That can't be right, can it? I mean, just look at her! She totally seems like the sort of girl who'd have healing powers, doesn't she? How could someone with an aura so gentle that you feel soothed just standing next to her not have a power along those lines?

“Seriously, Hitomi, what were you thinking?” sighed Hajime.

“Don't act like this is *my* fault!” I shouted back. “You said she was a girl with long hair, and that's what I told everyone else too! And besides, Fan's the one who—”

“W-W-Wait, I didn’t do anything wrong either!” protested Fan before I could finish. “All you told me was that she was a girl with long hair—I was positive I had the right one! She just looks like the sort of person who’d have healing powers, doesn’t she? And I did everything you said until Akutagawa took over...”

“I waited until the target was isolated, then I led her to this river, just like you told me to,” said Akutagawa. “I’m not responsible for this.”

“Y’know, none of this would’ve happened if Natsu had just done a scouting run in the first place,” grumbled Toki.

“Hey! Gimme a break, Toks!” shouted Aki. “This was totally *not* my deal, okay?! I had school today! I couldn’t just ditch, and I went to the trouble of convincing Fanfan to handle it instead, didn’t I?!”

At that point, all of us devolved into petty quibbling over who, exactly, was to blame for this debacle. The whole operation had been such a rush job that pretty much everyone had dropped the ball in one way or another. Our boss, meanwhile, grumbled as he watched us argue. “Sheesh. You’re all totally useless, you know that?”

“This is all *your* fault to begin with!” the rest of us shouted in unison. To be completely accurate, everything about this incident, from its inception to the point where it went off the rails, was Hajime’s doing. Not only did he half-ass our orders, mobilizing the whole organization to help cure his eye infection wasn’t exactly an impressive use of authority. And *none* of this would’ve happened at all if he hadn’t been playing around with color contacts!

“Screw this bullshit,” grumbled Toki. “I’m just gonna leave, Hitomi. I couldn’t care less *what* happens to Kiryuu’s eye.”

“Same,” muttered Akutagawa.

“I-I think I’ll go home too,” Fan chimed in, then sighed. “Hinoemata was right—I should’ve left the second I had the chance.”

“Yeah, I’m outta here too,” said Aki. “Oh, right—hey, Ryuu! Here’re the eyedrops you asked for, and the receipt. I’ll bill you for the drops and my delivery fee later!”

And just like that, our members dispersed to the winds. Hajime, Umeko, and I were left behind on the gravel path, lit by the setting sun. Oh, plus Kushikawa Hatoko, who was still sleeping soundly.

“Kay, think I’ll make tracks too,” said Hajime.

“Oh, *no* you don’t!” I shouted, grabbing him firmly by the shoulder. “You think you can just walk away, mister biggest-troublemaker-of-them-all?! Clean up your mess! What the heck are we supposed to *do* with this girl?!”

“Meh. Why not just drop her off on the ground somewhere? She’ll wake up and go home on her own eventually.”

He’s not serious, right? From a common sense perspective, abandoning an unconscious teenage girl outside was so far out of the question, it wasn’t even funny. More to the point, as the theoretical adults in this situation, I felt like we had a responsibility to take care of her, especially considering how much trouble we’d already dragged her into on account of a misunderstanding...though of course, we’d sorta lost the right to act like authority figures at the point where we’d abducted a minor.

“How shall I proceed, Hitomi?” Umeko asked. She sounded totally disinterested in the situation, and while she didn’t seem particularly bothered by the fact that she was still carrying a girl who was bigger than her on her back, I figured she wouldn’t want to keep it up forever. At the very least, I was feeling guilty about it.

“Umm, good question,” I said. “I-I guess we should take her to my place for now. Hajime can make up a story to explain all this when she wakes up.”

“Huh? Why me?” asked Hajime.

“Because this is all *your* fault! You were chatting with her while you waited for us to arrive, right? Well, do that again and feed her a story to pull us out of this mess!”

“Bah! Fine, fine, have it your way,” Hajime grumbled, giving in at long last.

I glanced up at the sky. The sunset was rapidly fading away, and night was setting in. “It’s getting pretty late, and if we keep her out any longer, it might turn into a huge deal,” I said. “Oh, right... Come to think of it, I told Sagami to

steal her phone if he got the chance. Oh, no—now we’re going to have to get *that* back for her too...”

That part of the plan had been a real just-in-case sort of deal, and now it was coming back to bite me. Our *initial* plan was to use my Evil Eye to manipulate her into fixing Hajime’s eye, then let her go then and there. Putting her to sleep had been a spur-of-the-moment reaction to realizing that she was the wrong person, and *that* had just made the whole problem even more complicated as well. We’d screwed up big time, plain and simple, and now we had to figure out what the heck we were supposed to do about it. I’d put quite a lot of effort into putting her to sleep, unfortunately, and she’d probably be out for at least a few more hours.

“Man,” sighed Hajime, “if only one of them would go through a super convenient awakening, gain a brand new power, and steal her back before we even knew what was happening.”

“That would take an actual miracle, and it’s *definitely* not happening.”

The next day found Hajime sprawled out on my bed, laughing his head off.

“Bwa ha ha! In the end, everything went *just* as planned!” he declared with an incredibly smug grin.

It happened. A miracle had *actually* gone and happened.

After everyone went home yesterday, we brought Kushikawa Hatoko back to my apartment and laid her out on my bed to wait for her to wake up. Before that could happen, though, she was suddenly engulfed in light, then vanished before our eyes. Calling it a shock would be an understatement—Hajime and I were both completely flabbergasted. There was nothing even remotely natural about a girl vanishing in a flash of light, so we figured out that it had been the work of somebody’s power more or less immediately.

We brought Aki to scope out the situation the next day, and we ended up concluding that one of the other literary club members’ powers had done the deed. The member in question had awakened to a new ability that was sleeping within her, all for the sake of saving her friend. I was a little jealous of those kids, honestly. Their group was clearly held together by some pretty strong

bonds, which put it in sharp contrast to *our* organization, which was more or less held together with tape and fraying string.

“Oh, right,” said Hajime. “Hey, Hitomi—don’t tell Sagami about any of this, ‘kay? Looks like he thinks I had the girl kidnapped for some grand scheme or something, and I’d rather let that misunderstanding stand.”

Now that he mentioned it, it occurred to me that I’d never actually told Sagami anything about the reasoning behind the abduction. Our objective had been incredibly petty and stupid, in truth, but from Sagami’s perspective, it probably looked like an isolated step in some greater master plan. It was a pretty hilarious misapprehension, and I almost had to feel sorry for him, but the fact that I hated his guts made it pretty easy to resist the urge.

“Got it. But, you know...I’ll grant you that it *did* all turn out well in the end, but this wasn’t even *close* to going just as planned, was it? You didn’t even get your eye fixed,” I pointed out from the kitchen, where I was busy making dinner.

The trouble that Hajime had caused got resolved by a series of increasingly improbable coincidences, not by any actual effort on our part. That being said, stirring up a huge incident that somehow got resolved with no real harm done in the end was kind of one of Hajime’s things. The fact remained, though, that in this case, the issue that had sparked the whole venture—Hajime’s infected eye—hadn’t been fixed in the slightest.

“I know, right?” Hajime groaned. “Seriously, what am I supposed to do about this?”

“Leave it alone until it gets better,” I replied. “Dinner’s done, by the way.”

I carried our meal out to the table. Umeko was staying at Aki’s house that night, so Hajime and I were eating on our own and I’d only made two portions.

“We’ve got a Japanese-style hamburger with tofu in it, stewed spinach, and miso soup with clams tonight,” I explained as I set the meal out.

“Oh, nice! Looks great,” said Hajime.

We sat down, said our thanks, and dug in. “How is it?” I asked after Hajime had taken a few bites.

“Good,” said Hajime. “Tasty as always.”

“Glad to hear it,” I replied.

“Speaking of food, you’ve been putting an awful lotta effort into your cooking lately, haven’t you, Hitomi?”

“Huh? I-I dunno, I guess? I, umm... I guess I decided to try fighting this battle in a different field, you might say,” I muttered with a forced smile, then added “I figured I’d try taking on chuuni power with girl power” in a whisper.

Hajime blinked. “Huh?”

“Ha ha, don’t worry about it!” I said, cutting off the conversation and pointedly turning my attention back to the food.

It wasn’t long before Hajime once again steered us back to the question of his eye. “For real, though, what *am* I gonna do?” he asked. “I’m not into the thought of doing *another* kidnapping to get *Route of Origin* for real this time...but it’s not like I can come up with any other options offhand...”

“You’re really stuck on this, aren’t you?” I observed. It’s not like I couldn’t sympathize with the desire to cure himself as soon as possible, and I could begrudgingly admit that I understood his desire to get back to playing Evil Eye as quickly as he could too. Still, though, those didn’t feel like big enough reasons to make him *this* fixated on it. “The doctor said it’d be all better in a week or so, right? Why not just let it heal naturally?”

It wasn’t like he’d go blind in the worst case or anything—this was the sort of infection that would get better with just a little time and rest. It certainly wasn’t something to get all *desperate* about. Going into battle with an eye out of commission *would* make most people a little apprehensive, I guess, but Hajime wasn’t most people. He’d been all about running around with an eye patch before he’d met me, after all. I had a feeling he could fight with perfect efficiency, even with one of those on.

“Well, yeah, but...well, y’know,” Hajime said, then trailed off, broke eye contact, and scratched his head awkwardly. That was an exceptionally rare attitude for Hajime to take, and silence fell as he hesitated for a few seconds more, then finally spat it out in an incredibly quiet mumble. “I promised, didn’t

I?”

“Huh? Promised what?” I asked.

“Back in high school. Y’know, on the rooftop...?”

The pieces finally clicked together, and I let out a tiny gasp.

“I’ll never wear an eye patch for kicks again.”

The promise he’d made on that day flashed vividly into my mind—the day that Hajime had given me a genuine and earnest apology. The day he’d told me that he would indulge my complex about my eye.

“You remembered...?” I said in shock and disbelief. That had been six years ago. I was *positive* he’d forgotten all about it. Heck, *I’d* come close to forgetting about it myself! I’d never even dreamed that he’d still be keeping the promise. The act of making it was all I’d needed, after all—I’d never *really* expected him to follow through...but had he, really? Had he *actually* been deliberately keeping his promise this whole time?

“B-But, it’s not like you’re wearing that for kicks, right?” I stammered. “That means you’re not even breaking the promise! It doesn’t count at all!”

“Well, yeah. But I just thought it might leave a bad taste in your mouth anyway, y’know...?” he said, still refusing to look at me. His gaze was usually so piercing it was downright terrifying, but there was absolutely nothing scary about the way he was acting now.

“Oh...but don’t get the wrong idea, okay?” Hajime quickly added. “It’s not like I was *worried* about you or anything like that! It’s just that when Kiryuu Heldkaiser Luci-First makes a vow, he *keeps* it! It’s a matter of pride, that’s all,” he rambled in a rapid-fire excuse that went in one ear and out the other for me. My mind and heart were already full to capacity. It felt like my head was about to short-circuit and my heart was about to pop.

Seriously...come on! This man. This man, I swear to god!

“Hajime,” I said, setting down my chopsticks and leaning forward. “Let’s go

find a photo booth!”

It was only around eight at night when we arrived at the arcade by the station, and the place was packed, mostly with students. We weaved our way between groups of uniformed youths, eventually reaching the floor with all the photo sticker booths.

“Huh,” said Hajime. “Surprised this place is so crowded.”

“Right?” I agreed. “Ah, there’s an empty booth over there! How’s that one look to you?”

“Couldn’t care less which one we use. What’s the big idea, anyway? Where’s this coming from?” asked Hajime.

“Who cares? This sort of thing’s fun every once in a while! Just go with it,” I replied.

“Just so you know, I’m not paying for this. You want a picture, you get to foot the bill,” said Hajime.

Woow. What a cheapo. Hajime kept grumbling away, but I pulled him by the hand into a vacant booth, shutting us within its excessively white and well-lit walls. Suddenly I was very aware of how close we were to each other and how private the space was, and I found myself getting a little nervous, though of course, it was far too late to turn back.

“U-Umm... Ah, right! We have to pay first,” I said, pulling out my wallet only to realize that I’d forgotten something important. “Oh, rats—I’m out of hundred yen coins...” It was a classic photo booth slipup. You only realize you don’t have the cash for it *after* you’ve already stepped inside. “Sorry,” I said. “Give me a minute—I’ll go change some money.”

“Don’t bother,” Hajime grumbled as he dropped four hundred-yen coins into my hand. He’d pulled out his own wallet before I knew it.

“Huh? Y-You don’t mind?” I asked.

“You can pay me back later,” grunted Hajime.

“R-Right,” I said. I didn’t feed the coins into the machine just yet, though—I

had some preparations to take care of first. I reached into my bag for a certain item that I'd stealthily brought along with me. "Ta-da!" I said as I pulled it out.

Hajime's eyes widened. "Seriously...? You still have that thing?"

"Yup," I replied, dropping my gaze and taking a long, hard look at the accessory in my hand: a black leather eye patch. It had a design sewn into it with silver thread, and it was very obviously not meant for any sort of medical use. It was also an item that Hajime himself had given to me—a memento of our time in high school.

I raised the patch to my right eye, wrapping its belt around my head. The fact that it was designed to be worn over your right eye made the whole thing feel almost like destiny or something. I didn't know why—and I sort of suspected there *was* no real reason—but Hajime had a thing about *right* eyes in particular being fantastical in one way or another. He swapped his colored contact around every once in a while, but on the whole, he kept his right eye red more often than not. Mine was blind, and his was dedicated to pointless posing.

I turned to look at Hajime and smiled. "Well? How do I look in an eye patch? Cool?" I was wearing it for kicks, no two ways about it, and for a moment, Hajime looked shocked. He got over it pretty quickly, though, and smiled back at me.

"You sure do. Cool as hell," Hajime said with a broad, villainous grin. Wearing an eye patch did nothing to change my field of vision, though, so his smile looked just the same to me as it always did.

"All right, then let's take some pictures! You get it now, right? Matching eye patches?"

"Bwa ha ha! There's only two of us, so there's no excuse for having our character designs be this redundant!"

"Oh, hush," I said, then dropped the coins into the machine and looked through the frames and backgrounds, quibbling with Hajime all the while. Eventually, I settled on a kind of fancy, vaguely gothic frame, and the two of us belatedly remembered to strike a pose as the machine began to count in a robotic voice. When the countdown ended, the sound of a camera's shutter rang out.

The question is: did I manage to pull off a cute little wink today?



DAK RANG II

Scifer
descended
upon this
mortal realm

Afterword

Back when I first started working on this series, my concept for the story was “an enormous chuuni is wrapped up in real-world supernatural battles and gets to go on a rampage using all the powers and skills he’d dreamed up in his wildest fantasies.” When I talked with my editor about the idea, though, they proposed that it would actually be funnier if the main character *didn’t* get wrapped up in any battles at all, and so the premise for *When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace* was born.

That initial, nixed idea, however, would live on in the form of *this* volume’s protagonist, Kiryuu Hajime, and it would come to form the backbone of his character. Kiryuu Hajime and Andou Jurai are two sides of the same coin, in a sense. They walk deeply contrasting paths throughout their tales, but back in the planning stage, they were actually almost the same person.

In a meta sense, Kiryuu Hajime is the man who couldn’t become the protagonist, and the fact that I was able to write a story in which he managed to be one in the end is honestly rather moving to me. When the first volume of this series was published and my editor brought up the idea of running short stories in a digital magazine format, I asked if I could make them about Kiryuu because I figured it couldn’t hurt to try, and I’m now very happy I took that shot in the dark. It never hurts to ask!

With all that said, hello! This is Kota Nozomi, and this volume was a compilation of side stories that ran for a year or so in the GA Bunko Magazine. They were serialized under the title *The Commonplace Exists for Supernatural Battles*, and I’m incredibly pleased that I was able to put them out in the form of a single volume. I’d started out writing the stories with the intention of making Kiryuu Hajime the protagonist, but by the time I was finished, it sort of felt like that duty had shifted over to the woman who was hopelessly charmed by our favorite fallen angel: Saitou Hitomi. Then again, the readers are the ones who get to decide who the *real* protagonist is in the end, so I’ll leave that judgment up to them.

And now, it's time for thanks and acknowledgments! First, to my editor Nakamizo: as always, thank you for all your help! Thank you in particular for granting me permission to take the outrageous step of featuring a guy as the main focus of the volume's cover.

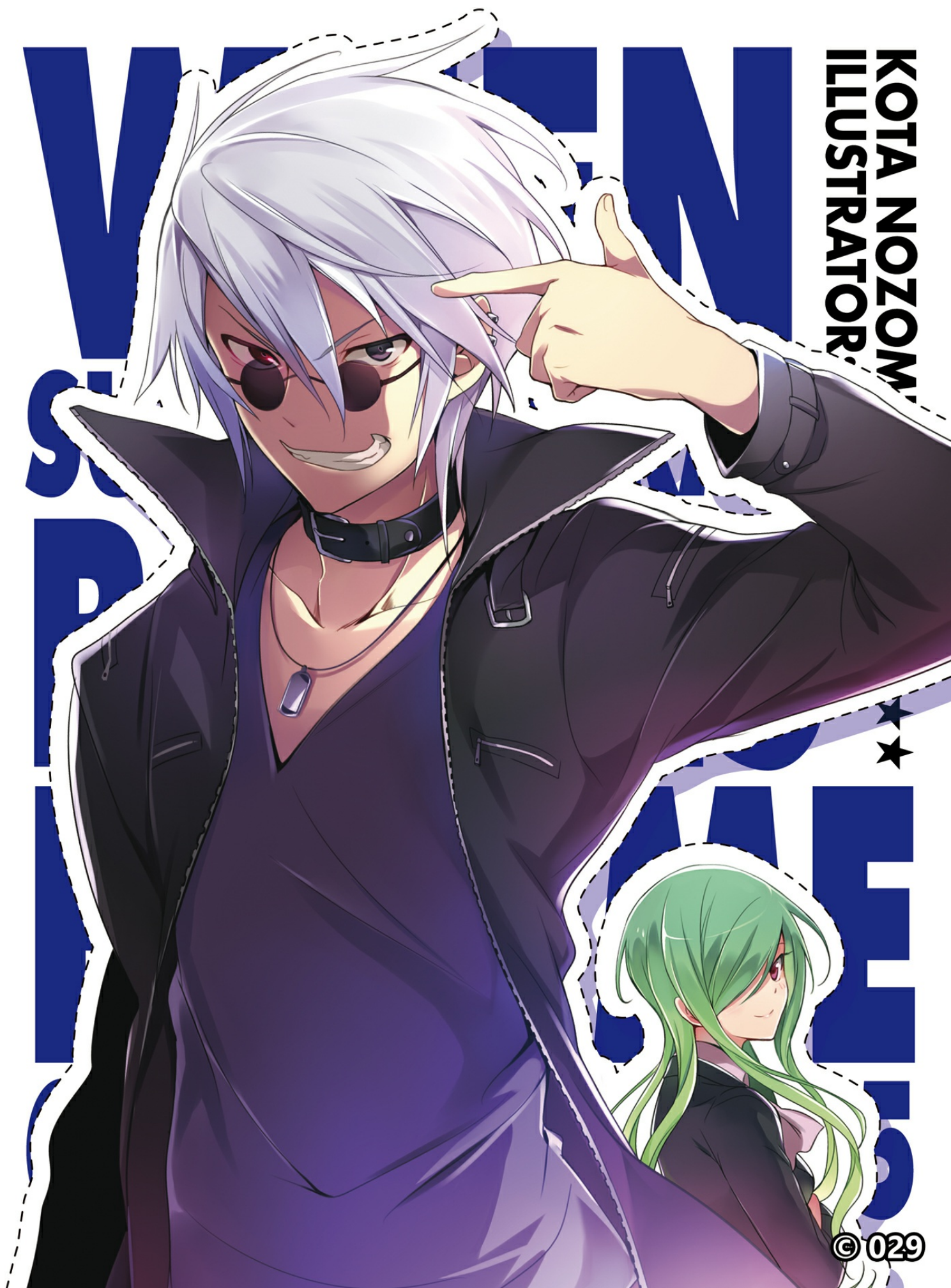
Next, to 029: thank you for continuing to draw such incredible illustrations! The cover in particular was just perfect this time around. The first time I saw it, I thought that one glance might be enough to make me pregnant—and I'm a guy!

Finally, I'd like to offer my greatest of thanks to all the readers who've stuck with me through five volumes so far.

With that said, may we meet again, if the fates allow it!

Kota Nozomi

KOTA NOZOMI
ILLUSTRATOR





Bonus Translation Notes: On Publication

The world of light novel publishing is, in a word, complicated. This is true in the English-speaking side of the industry, of course, but what I'm really talking about is the Japanese side, where all sorts of strangeness goes down that English-speaking fans are generally only exposed to bits and pieces of. Given that weirdness's relevance to this very volume's publication history, I thought I'd dig into that topic with a broad and basic overview of how all that stuff works!

Kota Nozomi alluded to one of the peculiarities of the light novel world back in the afterword for volume 2 when he brought up *Supernatural Battles*'s short story series. He noted that they *might* get compiled into a single volume someday, but that if you don't bother looking into them, "you never know when you might be missing out"—a particularly distressing phrasing for overseas fans who very literally wouldn't even know if there were chunks of content somewhere out there that never made it into a volume! Thankfully, as this volume's afterword made clear, the short stories were indeed compiled and published as a single volume—but what's the deal with these short stories, anyway? And "light novel magazines"? Are those, like, a *thing*?

In short: yes, but also, it's complicated! The most obvious point of comparison would seem to be manga magazines at a glance, but light novel magazines are fairly distinct in a number of ways. For one thing, it's pretty common for light novel magazines to *also* feature serialized manga—often adaptations or spin-offs of light novel series associated with the same publisher. That's a good representation of the other thing that makes them distinct: unlike manga magazines, which tend to be focused around serializing the same continuous stories on a week-to-week or month-to-month basis, the light novel magazines I've personally explored are a much more eclectic mishmash, both in terms of the types of content and the specific series that are featured.

Note that I'm generalizing based on a fairly limited data set—my knowledge of light novel magazines is by no means encyclopedic, and there are probably

examples that don't conform to the format I'm describing here! That being said, in my experience, light novel magazines tend to have a mixture of features and advertisements about light novels themselves; news and promotions about adaptations and merch; manga; and, of course, short stories from existing series and/or sections of novels that are being serialized. A ton of light novels have started out in this serialized form, and others that started out as full novels have had short stories compiled into single volumes later on, much like this very volume of *Supernatural Battles*.

Of course, not *every* series that has a short story in a magazine is necessarily going to put it into a volume later on down the line! If all this is making you worry about missing content from your favorite light novel series, I have some bad news for you: the magazines are only the tip of the iceberg. There are *plenty* of other ways in which content for light novel series gets put out that never finds its way into a proper volume, and by extension never ends up getting translated.

The biggest example that comes to mind is a relatively modern trend: short stories that are included with light novels when you buy them from a specific retailer. The idea, presumably, is to encourage people to buy multiple copies of the book from different places in order to get all that bonus content. If you're reading these TL notes, I assume that you're aware of J-Novel Club's premium ebook bonuses, and I imagine you've probably encountered short stories included in one of those premium ebooks as its bonus content. Those short stories are frequently the very same bonus stories that were handed out with a purchase in Japan.

Between bonus short stories, magazine ones, online ones, and presumably even more methods of media delivery I'm not aware of, there's a *lot* to keep track of if you want to know for sure you've seen everything there is to see from a series. I'm sure that every hyper-popular franchise has at least one hyper-obsessive fan keeping a comprehensive index of every piece of media put out to date, but I'm equally sure that with the light novel industry as saturated as it is, a lot of stuff still slips through the cracks. The thought of how many of these stories are likely to end up as lost media honestly distresses me, and I really appreciate that JNC's premium ebook system gives at least some of them

the chance to not only be preserved, but also be brought over to an international audience. (Disclaimer: JNC management did not request that I plug the company like this or pay me extra for doing so. Which is not to say I *wouldn't* accept a bribe—if my PM's reading this, you know where to find me.)

With all that established, I'd like to steer us back toward *Supernatural Battles* to dig into one final question: what else, if anything, is out there for this series in particular? Does volume 5 represent the only side content that was ever put out, or was more written after the fact? I won't go into all the details of the digital archaeological dig I conducted in an effort to find the answer to that question—picture a maze of broken links, ancient promo pages, and dead ends that I had to use archive.org to get around—but the long story short version is that yes, there *were* more *Supernatural Battles* short stories! I actually had to buy a digital copy of the February 2014 issue of GA Bunko Magazine to verify this fact (which was in and of itself something of an ordeal thanks to region restrictions), but within it I found what was very distinctly content that volume 5 did *not* cover...only to run a search for the first line and discover that it *is* covered in volume 9.

So, yeah—there *were* more magazine short stories, and you *will* get to read (at least some of) them four volumes from now! I wasn't able to conclusively verify that absolutely all the short stories that were ever written ended up republished in that manner, but personally speaking, I'm reasonably confident that's the case. I bought a bunch of other digital GA Bunko Magazine copies, and the last short story I could find was in the October 2014 issue. If there were any more after that point, they're remarkably well hidden, and that final story is also present in volume 9. The complete and utter lack of a clear, searchable index of the stories that have run in the magazine keeps me from being as conclusive as I'd like to be about this, but you'll just have to take my word that if there *are* secret *Supernatural Battles* short stories out there somewhere, they're incredibly hard to track down whether you know Japanese or not.

One last note re: non-novel content: over the course of my search, I *did* stumble across evidence of a few pieces of other *Supernatural Battles* media! There was a manga, to start, which had four volumes published in total from early 2014 to early 2015. There were also at least two drama CDs, one of which

was a standalone release from 2013 and the other of which came bundled with the special edition of volume 10 in 2015. On a somewhat similar note, there was also a radio show associated with the series and hosted by the anime's voice actresses for Tomoyo and Chifuyu, though unlike the drama CDs, the radio show doesn't seem to have been done in-character and is only tangentially related to the series in terms of content.

Finally, and most shockingly, it turns out that there was a short-lived *Supernatural Battles* gacha game! Described as a "card battle RPG," the game lasted for less than a year before being summarily shut down. There's very little information available online about the game itself—there's only one extant video associated with it, and it's a sixteen-second trailer with no gameplay footage—but I did find one rather irate review that described it as being a bug-riddled, borderline unplayable mess, so I think we can make a pretty educated guess as to what did it in.

Unfortunately, I can say with great confidence that the drama CDs will never be officially translated, and with reasonable confidence that the manga's highly unlikely as well. I may, however, attempt to get my hands on them and at the very least provide a description/summary of them in a future TL notes section, so stay tuned for that (pending my ability to actually find and acquire the things)!

And with that, I believe it's time to move on to the references! This volume is something of an oddity in the sense that we have way fewer of them to go over than usual—you can thank Hitomi being significantly less of an unapologetic nerd than our usual narrator for that fact. Kiryuu's presence means that we still have a handful of pop-culture shout-outs to contextualize, though, and it's my job to make sure they don't go over your head in the way that most of them went over Hitomi's, so let's get to it!

Prologue

△ Prosciutto and Aizen would be laughing their asses off if they were here, y’know?

Prosciutto and Aizen are antagonists from *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure* and *Bleach*, respectively! Both of them express rather strong opinions about people who say things like “I’ll kill you!”—specifically, Prosciutto says that weaklings shout about how they’re going to kill people to make themselves feel better about their weakness, while Aizen says that making “rash threats” like “I’ll kill you” just makes you look weak.

△ My turn never ends.

This is a reference to an infamous scene from the *Yu-Gi-Oh!* anime that ended up becoming a fairly widespread internet meme! This also isn’t the first time said meme has come up, thanks to the author referring to the title this chapter was initially published under as a short story (“Draw! Big Brother Card!”) back in volume 2’s afterword. You can see that volume’s notes section for a more detailed summary, but to summarize, the scene involves Yugi severely overkilling his opponent without ever giving them the chance to fight back.

Chapter 2

△ *My personal motto? ‘Among the heavens and Earth, I stand unrivaled.’*

This phrase, which you may have heard in its transliterated form—“tenjou tenge yuiga dokuson”—has significance in two related but still fairly distinct manners! On the one hand, it’s a phrase that has great significance in Zen Buddhism, having been uttered by a Buddha in the moment he achieved enlightenment. On the other hand, it comes up a *lot* in Japanese media of all forms and genres, most often when a character quotes the phrase in a self-aggrandizing fashion (or quotes it to talk up some other character). The phrase as used in media is certainly an explicit allusion to the Buddhist phrase, but it’s taken on a life of its own at this point, and its modern usage doesn’t necessarily have much to do with its original religious meaning.

△ *My favorite DIO? The version in Part 6.*

It wouldn’t be a volume of *Supernatural Battles* without multiple *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure* references! This one refers to the series’s most prolific recurring antagonist, DIO, who makes appearances in and influences the story of almost every arc of the series. The manner in which he manifests in each given arc tends to be fairly different, so while the idea of naming your favorite DIO *is* comically geeky, it’s also not a totally absurd statement.

△ *Why’re you hiding your eye? Paying homage to Kitaro, the yokai?*

Kitaro is the main and titular character of *GeGeGe no Kitaro*, a classic manga by Mizuki Shigeru that ran throughout the sixties and has been adapted into anime on multiple occasions. The manga centers its story around yokai, a fairly broad category of Japanese supernatural creatures, and is often credited for popularizing the use of yokai in modern Japanese media. Kitaro himself is a yokai, and resembles a human child for the most part—one of his only overtly abnormal features is his missing left eye, which he usually keeps covered up with his bangs in much the same manner Hitomi covers her right eye.

△ *Or maybe to Sanji?*

Sanji, meanwhile, is one of the main characters in *One Piece*. He also keeps one eye constantly covered by his bangs, though in his case, the one he keeps covered changes following a time skip, meaning that both of his eyes are present and seem to be fully functional.

△ *...he just kept moaning something about his 'Eight Trigrams Seal'...*

Moving on to another of the *Shonen Jump* big three, this refers to a technique from *Naruto*! Specifically, the Eight Trigrams Seal is the technique that was used to seal a nine-tailed fox beast inside the main character of the series. The seal itself is located on Naruto's abdomen, right around the spot where Hitomi kneed Kiryuu.

△ *My Hierro Skin is the hardest of all the Espadas!*

And just like that, we've reached the third of the big three: *Bleach*! Hierro is a defensive technique used by the Arrancar, and it involves them using spiritual power to harden their skin. The Espada, meanwhile, are a group made up of the ten most powerful Arrancar. Hajime's directly quoting an Espada named Nnoitora Gilga in this line.

Chapter 3

△ *...the only association I'd had with the word "jackknife" was Prince of Tennis...*

The jackknife is a technique in *Prince of Tennis* that involves a player jumping into the air as they hit a two-handed shot. There's also a "blackjackknife," a more powerful version of the shot that seems to be mostly distinguished by the flashy anime effects it produces and its ability to blow a player across the court.

Chapter 4

△ *Does Hajime have an absolute territory fetish?!*

Absolute territory—or zettai ryouiki, if you’re talking to a Japanese person or a particular sort of anime fan—refers to the patch of visible thigh found between the tops of high socks and the bottom of one’s skirt/shorts. People have some very strong and passionate opinions about this one, none of which I’ll be addressing in any capacity beyond acknowledging their existence. I will, however, note that the term itself is actually a *Neon Genesis Evangelion* reference, alluding to the Japanese term for what was rendered in English as “A.T. Field.”

△ *Sinner’s Sanction* ⇨

While this attack name isn’t technically a reference, the sheer madness of it all is easily deserving of its own write-up regardless, so here goes! There’s a *lot* to unpack here—normally I’d start by writing out the Japanese term and explaining its meaning, but unfortunately, I can’t do that this time around because I am incapable of typing the first character. The kanji for the term, you see, is “罪罰,” with a ruby text reading of ミツバチ (“mitsubachi”), except the “罪” is *upside-down*. If you’re curious how Kota Nozomi managed to type that, well, he didn’t—in the Japanese ebook for this volume, the upside-down 罪 is actually a midline image.

Let’s start by ignoring that whole upside-down thing and look at the characters in isolation. Some of 罪’s most prominent meanings are crime and sin, while 罰’s most prominent meaning is punishment. If those words feel like they sort of go together somehow, that would be because the Japanese name for Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* is 罪と罰 (“tsumi to batsu”). The allusion, of course, breaks down the moment you factor in the whole upside-down thing, but it’s at least present in a background capacity.

A reasonable attempt at reading 罪罰 while ignoring the upside-down aspect would be ツミバチ (“tsumibachi”), where the 罪 is “tsumi” and the 罰 is “bachi.” So, then, what’s the rationale for reading the upside-down 罪 as “mitsu” to get

“mitsubachi”? Well, when you reverse the “tsu” and “mi” characters, you end up with the “mitsu” reading. And, of course, the way you reverse text that’s written from top to bottom is to flip it upside-down!.

But where is all of this going? It all comes down to that final bit of ruby text, since “mitsubachi” is Japanese for “honey bee.” The description of the power uses a fair bit of stinger imagery, so it’s pretty easy to see how that meaning plays into its theme. Taken all together, the power’s name is made up of two characters that obliquely allude to *Crime and Punishment*, only they’ve been abused in a manner that makes them look obviously, immediately *wrong* in such a way as to twist their ruby text reading into a totally different word that plays into the mechanical effects of the power itself. *Phew*.

As I’m sure you can imagine, this was sort of a lot to try to carry over into English! We spent a lot—and I do mean a *lot*—of time playing around with various options and methods of approximating the effect before finally settling on the rendition we went with. This is one of those translation puzzles where there is no objectively correct answer, and there are indefinite equally valid manners in which this attack name could’ve been translated, but we were working with a few limiting factors that restricted our options—unlike Kota Nozomi, we can’t freely drop images into the middle of text lines, for a variety of very complicated technical and business-related reasons I won’t dig into here—and we ended up deciding to get a little creative and nail the *effect* of the Japanese, rather than obsessing over pulling a similar upside-down letter stunt.

So, how did we end up with ~~Sinner’s Sanction~~ ⇨? To make a long story short, it was a process of identifying the most important components of the Japanese’s effect and coming up with something that ticked all the same boxes. We figured that the English term would have to A: have a similarly indirect association with the concepts of crime and punishment, B: include some aspect that lets us work the skill name into the description of its effects, C: have some sort of text-based nonsense that prompts an immediate reaction of “wait, can you *do* that?” (an equivalent for the upside-down character), and D: be chuuni as *heck*. The use of the words “sinner’s sanction” was our attempt to fulfill component A, while B-C were all accomplished with text formatting and a single special character. In short: the one thing we could do that felt like it’d be as

chuuni as flipping half the name upside-down to make a new word was running the whole name through with a spear.

Chapter 5

△ *Ruined's Raking*

It's another skill name! This one won't take half a dozen paragraphs to explain, fortunately, though it does deserve a cursory explanation since it's also an instance of Kota Nozomi being insufferably clever in the most chuuni way possible. In Japanese, this skill is written as “斬黒” in kanji—with 斬 broadly meaning “kill” (though with a bunch of contextual nuance) and 黒 meaning “black”—with the provided ruby text reading ザクロ (“zakuro”), meaning pomegranate. It doesn't take *too* much creative interpretation to read 斬 as “za,” and “kuro” is a standard reading for 黒, so the pronunciation basically checks out this time.

The logic behind the attack in its original form is that it makes the blood of its victims spurt into the air in a manner that resembles kernels from a pomegranate. The complicating factor that prevented us from carrying this image over as is, however, is the fact that there's *another* layer to the “zakuro” name, that being its intended double meaning: it could be read as “zakuro” (“pomegranate”), or “za kuro” (“the claw,” with an extremely heavy katakana accent).

So, once again, we had to get our priorities in order! We knew that our skill name would have to tie into a blood spray image, and we knew that it needed to sound pretty cool at a glance, but have a double meaning that wouldn't be immediately obvious and would kind of make the whole thing feel a little silly once you finally figure it out. Using the word “rake” to approximate the clawing feel, swapping in autumn leaves for pomegranate kernels, and tying the whole thing together with a raking leaves joke was an absolute masterstroke of an idea on my editor's part that I can claim precisely zero credit for.

Chapter 6

△ *But I didn't refuse.*

This is an easy one, thank goodness—Hajime is playing off a famous *JoJo* quote, “But I refuse,” which was said by Kishibe Rohan in Part 4. This is one of the absolute most famous *JoJo* memes in the Japanese fandom, and if you watch enough anime, you’re sure to eventually see it get referenced in some capacity.

△ *In the Divine Comedy, Dante claimed that flame burns upward in an effort to climb back to the heavens from whence it came.*

While I wasn’t able to pin down any precise, specific passage from *The Divine Comedy* that Kiryuu’s alluding to in this line, the general concept *does* mesh pretty well with Dante’s portrayal of cosmology—particularly in *Paradiso*, which describes a sphere of fire in the Earth’s upper atmosphere, separating it from the spheres of Heaven. The really fun part, though, is that Kiryuu is once again pulling his high-brow literary quotations *directly* off of Japanese Wikipedia.

What makes this especially funny is that it took me a little while to realize that fact, on account of the quote being *very* slightly altered: Kiryuu uses 炎 as his kanji for fire, whereas Wikipedia uses the more archaic 焰. This is hysterical because 焰 is a kanji that Andou makes heavy use of (including in the kanji name for *Dark and Dark*), and I would speculate that the change was made specifically because having Kiryuu invoke the character would feel like having him step into Andou’s chuuni turf. While other volumes in the series use 焰 (or its alternate form 焔, which is used kinda interchangeably with it) to describe fire all over the place, volume 5 uses it precisely once, that being the moment that Kiryuu says the words *Dark and Dark*.

△ *If he'd told me he'd pulled a “this is the taste of someone who's lying” on it...*

And, we’re back to *JoJo* again. This quote refers to a moment in Part 5 where

a character named Bruno Bucciarati licks the part's protagonist's face and declares that he can *taste* his lies. In other words, this is a very nerdy way of saying "if he'd told me he'd licked it."

△ His power, apparently, had allowed him to change the shape and structure of metal, State-Alchemist-style.

This one's a very straightforward reference to the manner in which the alchemists in *Fullmetal Alchemist* can manipulate the physical structure of objects, leading to some very creative and elaborate transformation-based fight sequences.

That's all the high-octane nerdery we have for you this time around! Thanks for reading, as always, and I hope to see you again in volume 6 (where Andou will be back at the wheel and the geek jokes will once again be turned up to eleven)!

-Tristan Hill

Author: Kota Nozomi

Kota Nozomi’s Cringe Chronicles: Part 5

My teacher in an art class once went around asking each student what their favorite color was.

Teacher: “What’s your favorite color?”

Kota Nozomi: “Red as black as night. (Obnoxious smirk)”

The rest of the class: “(Deathly silence)”

Illustrator: 029 (Oniku)

Illustrator for *The Devil is a Part Timer!* (Published by ASCII Media Works), *Dragon Lies* (Published by Shogakukan), and *The 8th Cafeteria Girl* (Published by Shueisha).

/Bang\

(I don’t even know anymore)

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When Supernatural Battles Became Commonplace: Volume 5

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by Kota Nozomi

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